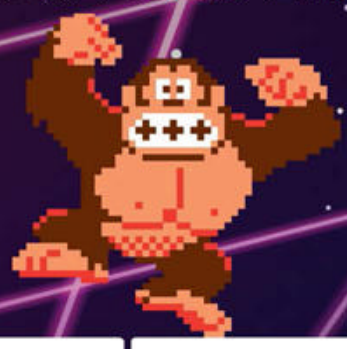
OLD!

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO CLASSIC GAMES

retro GAMER

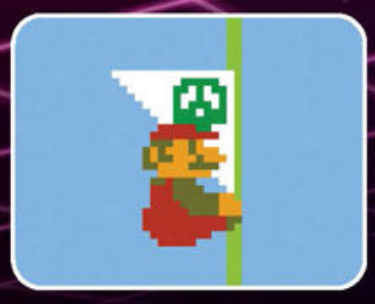


THE WAY OF THE EXPLODING FIST

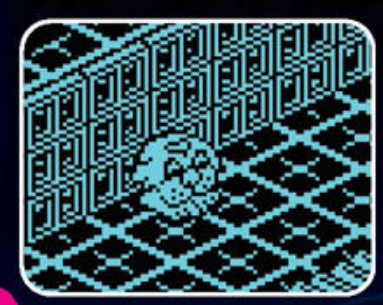
YOUR HARD-HITTING GUIDE TO THE SENSATIONAL KARATE SIM

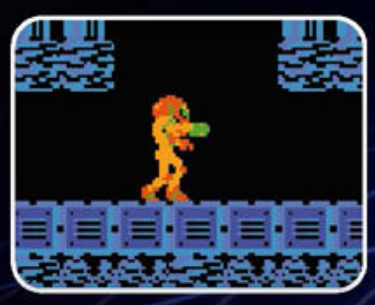
ROGER KEAN: A LASTING LEGACY

FRIENDS PAY TRIBUTE TO THE EDITOR OF CRASH AND ZZAP!64



THE 80s





A DECADE OF INCREDIBLE GAMES

A YEAR-BY-YEAR ACCOUNT OF THE TITLES THAT MADE THE 80s GREAT

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WHY DOMARK COMBINED FOOTBALL WITH PLATFORMING

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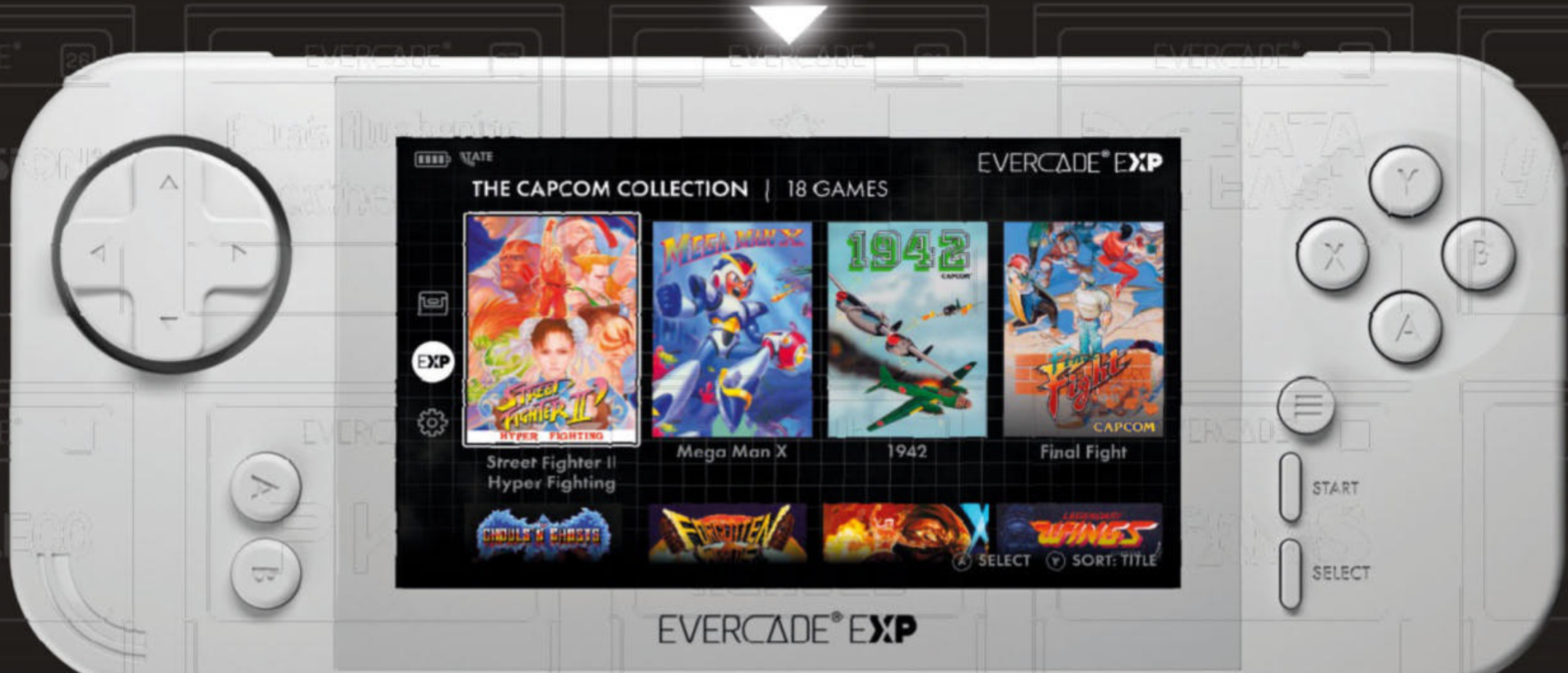

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THE RETROBATES

WHAT GAME DEFINED THE EIGHTIES FOR YOU?

DARRAN JONES

It has got to be *Donkey Kong* for me. It was a staple of every arcade, helped turned Nintendo into a powerhouse and introduced some chap called Mario.
Expertise: Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls and an award-winning magazine, all under one roof!
Currently playing: *Carrion*
Favourite game of all time: *Strider*

TIM EMPEY

I spent many hours playing *Gauntlet* with my brother. Killing monsters and fighting over food while trying to avoid Death was great.
Expertise: Finishing Game Pass games before they go
Currently playing: *Monster Hunter Rise*
Favourite game of all time: *God Hand*

NICK THORPE

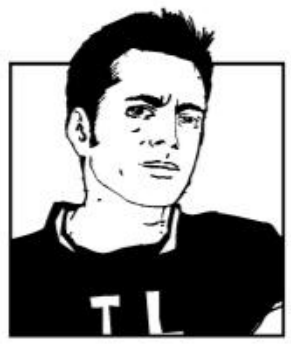
Ignoring the fact it's a good six years older than I am, *Pac-Man* is so iconic that it's always the first game I mentally associate with the Eighties.
Expertise: Owning five Master Systems and a Mark III
Currently playing: *The King Of Fighters XV*
Favourite game of all time: *Sonic The Hedgehog*

ANDY SALTER

As a fan of open-end sandbox games I'm going to say *Elite*, which along with *Asteroids,* went on to inspire one of my favourite games of all time, *Escape Velocity*.
Expertise: Modding games, no 'vanilla' versions for me, thanks!
Currently modding: *STALKER: Anomaly GAMMA*
Favourite game of all time: *Rome: Total War* although I guess it's the *Remastered* edition now.

PAUL DRURY

Sheep In Space, my favourite game. Home micros had long tried to replicate arcade titles, to varying degrees of success, but this showed how they could be inspired by them to produce games that were unique and utterly wonderful.
Expertise: Matthew Smith's favourite restaurants
Currently playing: *The Devil In Me*
Favourite game of all time: *Sheep In Space*



IAIN LEE

Pac-Man. It came in right at the start of the decade but seemed to maintain a pretty high level of saturation for most of the next ten years. I can't think of anything else that screams 'EIGHTIES' quite so loud.
Expertise: Buying expensive stuff on eBay then never touching it
Currently playing: *Gorilla Tag*
Favourite game of all time: *Elite* (BBC Model B)

GRAEME MASON

Jet Set Willy. It summed up the cultural excesses of the yuppie era with a very British slice of bizarre humour.
Expertise: Adjusting a tape azimuth with a screwdriver
Currently playing: *Fallout 4*
Favourite game of all time: *Resident Evil 4*

RORY MILNE

I've always felt that *Knight Lore* defined the Eighties. It was such a big leap from what had come previously that it raised expectations for what the decade still had in store.
Expertise: The game that I'm writing about at the time of writing
Currently playing: *Tomb Raider*
Favourite game of all time: *Tempest*

MARTYN CARROLL

Out Run! The car, the girl, the soundtrack, the open road representing the boundless possibilities that the Eighties offered. Then you hit a bridge support.
Expertise: Sinclair stuff
Currently playing: *The Last Of Us Part II*
Favourite game of all time: *Jet Set Willy*

The Eighties was a fantastic time to be a gamer. For me, everything felt fresh and exciting and I was always discovering new games either in the arcades or when I visited friends. The Seventies was an incredibly important time for gaming, but I'd argue that the Eighties is where the industry truly began to take off and people began to cotton on to just how much money could be made from games.

This month's cover feature focusses on how games evolved during this exciting decade and we've spoken to a number of creatives to find out what it was like during this transformative period. We've also highlighted 80 games which we feel help define how it felt to be a gamer during this fascinating time.

You'll find a nice Eighties vibe running throughout the issue as we revisit Gregg Barnett's *The Way Of The Exploding Fist*, chat to Chris Lancaster about his brief but interesting career in games and learn how Enigma Variations found success with licensed games. We also chat to the creators of *Marko's Magic Football*, go behind the scenes of *SimCopter* and get knee-deep in Xenomorphs with Konami's excellent *Aliens*. Oh, and check out our great new subscription offer on page 34.

Stay safe and enjoy the magazine.

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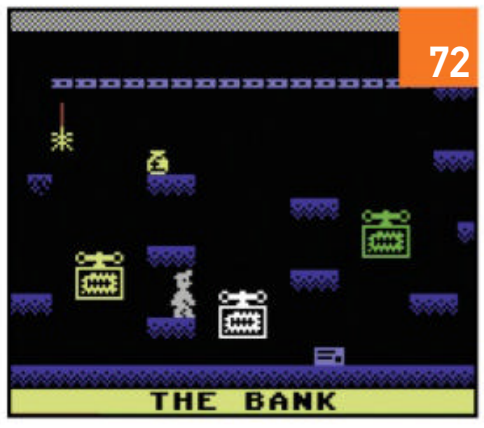
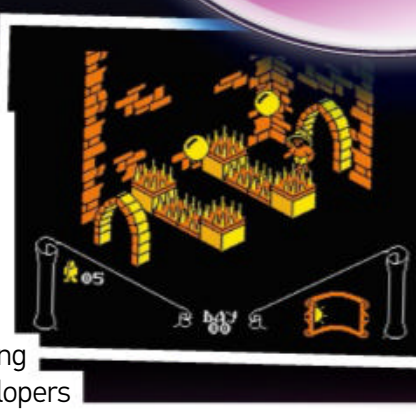


The Games That Defined The 80s

Nick and Darran look at how gaming evolved during this exciting time, reveal 80 defining games and chat to various iconic developers



Ultimate Guide: The Way Of The Exploding Fist

Everything you need to know about Gregg Barnett's ace fighting game

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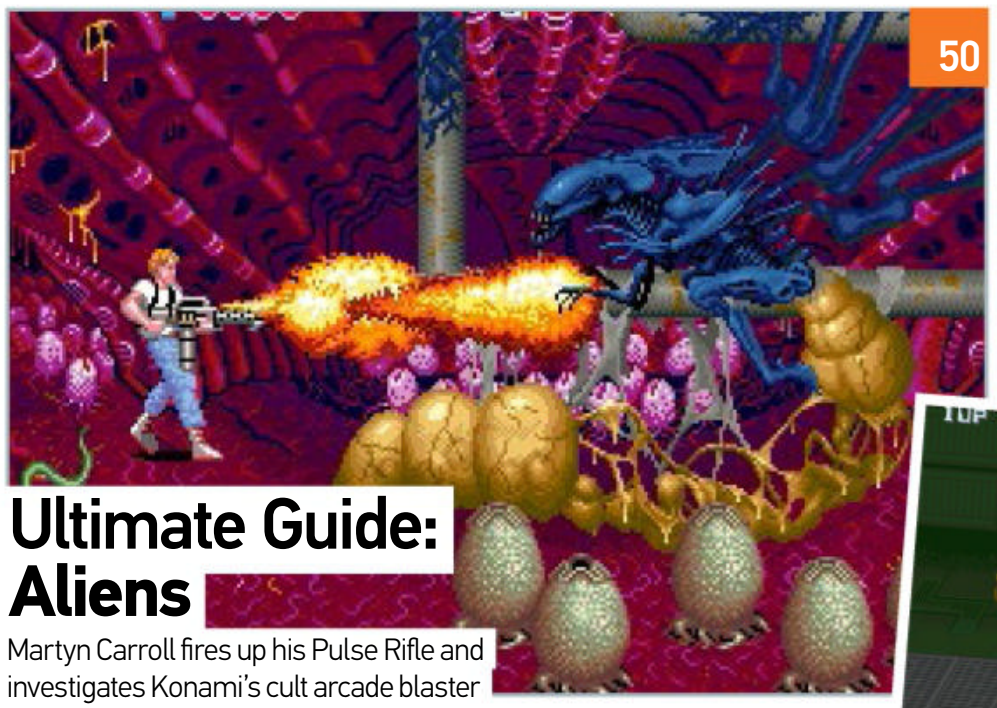
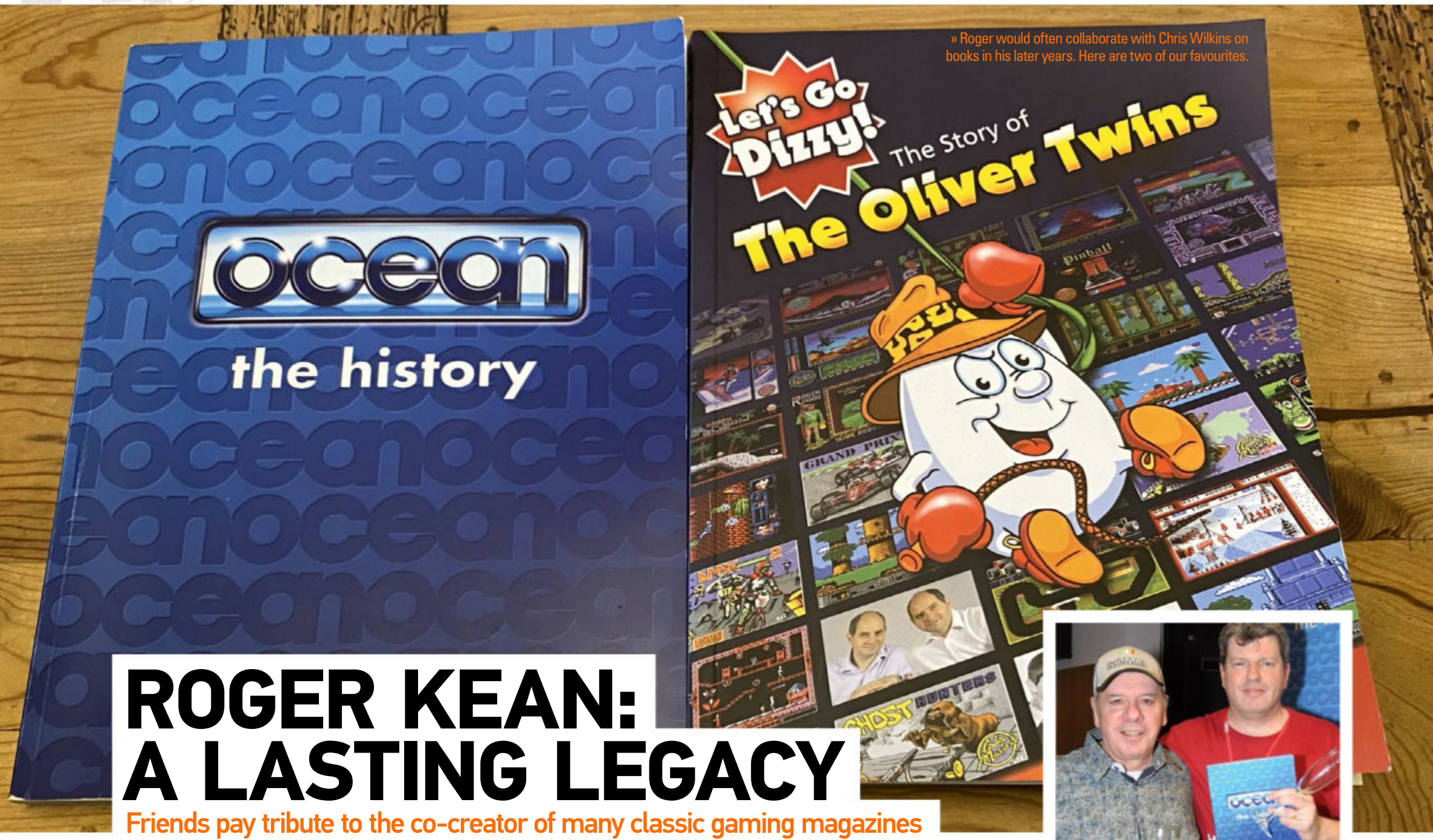


Ultimate Guide: Aliens

Martyn Carroll fires up his Pulse Rifle and investigates Konami's cult arcade blaster



» Roger would often collaborate with Chris Wilkins on books in his later years. Here are two of our favourites.

ROGER KEAN: A LASTING LEGACY

Friends pay tribute to the co-creator of many classic gaming magazines

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Paul recalls when he attempted to rule the playground with a new game

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Jeff Minter talks us through his brand-new psychadelic remake of a lost Atari game

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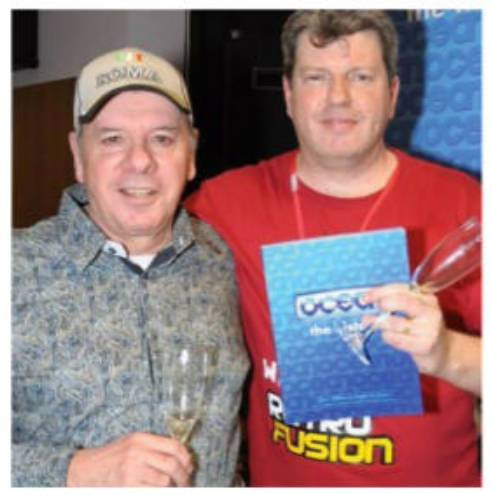
It's June 2006 and Nick has found another month of interesting games to comment on

Fans of *Crash*, *Zzap!64* and other classic Newsfield magazines were dealt a cruel blow in January when they learned that Roger Kean had passed away after a long battle with MND (Motor Neurone Disease). Roger, alongside his partner Oliver Frey (who sadly passed away in August 2022) formed Newsfield Publications with Oliver's brother, Franco in the early Eighties and quickly launched magazines like the aforementioned *Crash* and *Zzap!64*, creating an engaging, welcoming style that many other mags would emulate. Newsfield's magazines were also notable for their young reviewers, many of which have gone on to form industry careers of their own.

"Roger gave me my start in the games industry and magazine journalism – I have everything to thank him for after 35 years playing games for a living," recalls Amuzo Games' Nick Roberts, who worked on *Crash*. "I learned how to write and edit magazines under Roger's encouraging gaze and I remember Roger created an editorial bible of commonly misused phrases, words, punctuation and style points," Nick continues. "I carried on his style bible through many publishing companies I worked for, adapting and updating it for Nintendos, PlayStations and Xboxes. I made sure to tell him that his guidance influenced decades of magazine writers."

Another person who remembers the guiding hand of Roger is the acclaimed games coder Andrew Braybrook who had a regular coding column in *Zzap!64*. "When you're just starting out in games, everything is new and scary, plus you get to meet people who can seriously affect your future," he tells us. "Some people [like Roger] just have the aura of the boss. I am grateful that they took me under their wing and helped build me up. I'll always be grateful to Roger, Oli and Chris [Anderson] for that belief."

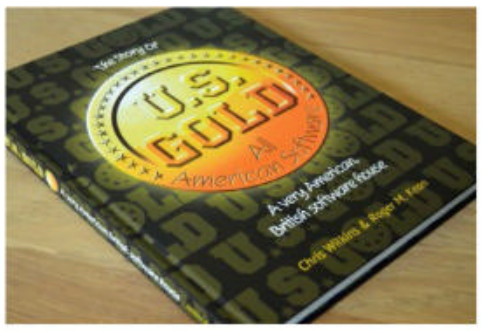
The diaries Andrew worked on became a popular part of *Zzap!64* and gave a rare insight into how games were created. "The diaries were an idea of Chris Anderson's (*Zzap!64*'s editor) as far as I could tell, though it's quite possible, or even likely, that Roger was in on that decision as well," he continues. "I'm not clear how they chose me, maybe I was just in the right place at the right time."



» Roger Kean (left) and Chris Wilkins celebrating the launch of *Ocean: The History*.

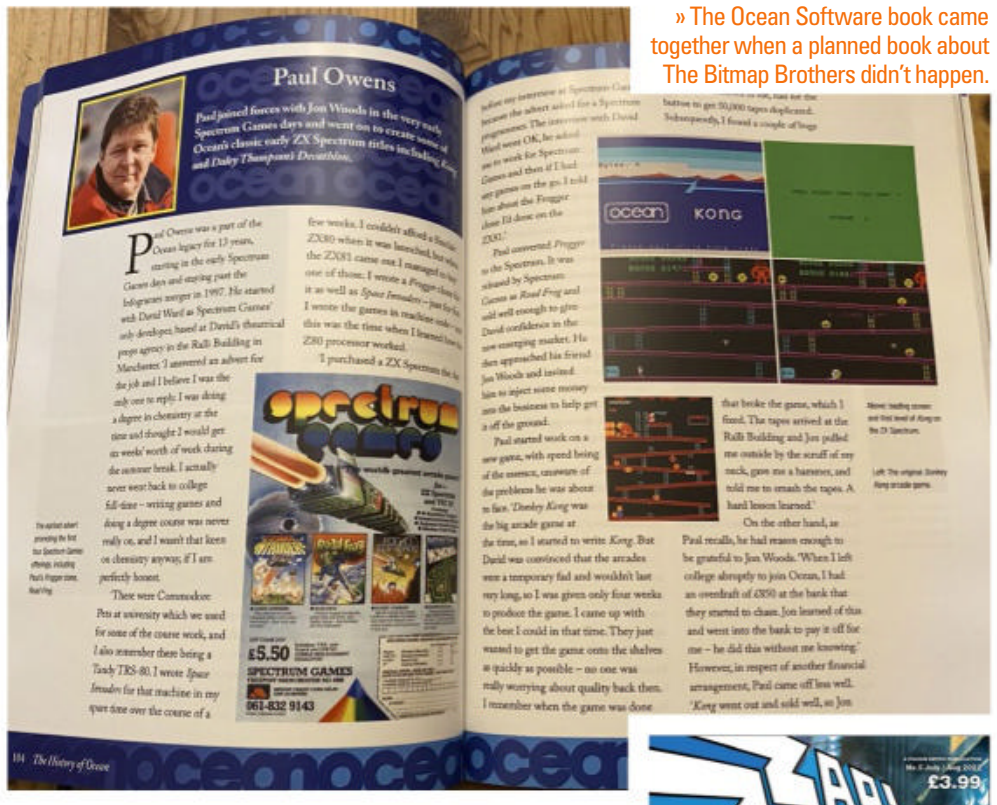
In addition to great timing, those monthly diaries helped Andrew in another way. "They led to me being invited to the programmer game challenges, which was great to meet my peers and swap phone numbers so we could talk about games and meet up occasionally," Andrew recalls. "Newsfield definitely set me up as part of the programming community, along with the two Garys [Penn and Liddon] and Julian [Rignall]. Respect is due."

Chris Wilkins is another person whose career has been irrevocably shaped by Roger Kean's



» Roger's book on US Gold was another meticulously researched tome, filled with interesting anecdotes about the company.

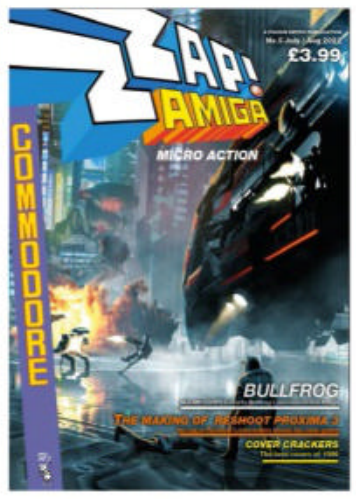
» Here's the editorial of *Crash* issue 1. Roger did most of the writing himself with help from Rod Bellamy (Lloyd Mangram being a pseudonym).



» The Ocean Software book came together when a planned book about The Bitmap Brothers didn't happen.

» *Crash* made an instant impact on store shelves, in no small part thanks to Oliver Frey's fantastic art.

» *Zzap!64* launched a number of big names, including Julian Rignall and Gary Penn.



» Roger's legacy remains today, with Chris continuing the brands of Newsfield and expending them to new projects like *Zzap! Amiga*.

mentorship and wisdom. He began talking to Roger whilst working on *Retro Fusion* and soon realised that Roger Kean worked at Thalamus Publishing alongside Matthew Uffindell, another longtime Newsfield regular. He first recalls meeting Roger and Oliver at Play Blackpool in 2010. "Never meet your heroes, they say. How wrong that can be sometimes." Chris would often chat to Roger and a friendship soon bloomed. "I always wanted to have 'my own thing'. I tried many things – making magazines, arcade machines, websites and more," Chris tells us. "With the arrival of Kickstarter in the UK, a whole new world of opportunity presented itself to me. I had become friends with Simon Butler and Mark R Jones, and I had also met Gary Bracey at the same event where I had met Rog and Oli – so the logical option for a book was Ocean Software. I asked Roger if he was up for it and his instant reply was, 'Yes.'"

That book was the start of a great relationship between Chris, Roger and Oliver and led to many other exciting projects, including *Crash Annual 2018*. "Roger did all the formatting with help from Steven Day who reproduced all the *Crash* header and footer graphics for each section," recalls Chris. More mentoring from Roger followed and while Roger and Oliver may no longer be with us, their legacy certainly won't be left behind. "Fusion Retro Books now owns the rights to Crash and *Zzap!64* as well as the artwork from the magazines including the iconic logos, as well as all other magazine publications from Newsfield," says Chris. "How does that make me feel? Damn proud and very humble to be in the position I am in to continue the legacy of two of my best friends."

It's an important legacy to carry on, and Nick Roberts feels part of that is due to Roger's integrity and attention to detail, resulting in magazines that readers loved. "Quality shone from every page [of *Crash* and *Zzap!64*], an attention to detail that the rival magazines lacked," he says. "Reviews on *Crash* may have been written by Ludlow School kids, but Roger was the editor, he chose who wrote what, knocked the rough edges off their text and encouraged them to improve their writing. The reviews were always honest, much to the chagrin of many an Eighties PR person who would threaten to pull advertising for bad reviews. Roger always stood firm – honesty and integrity were everything. The readers knew they could trust any magazine under Roger's stewardship. Thanks for everything Roger, you will be very much missed." *

> "Roger always stood firm – honesty and integrity were everything"
> **NICK ROBERTS**

RAIDEN III RETURNS

The *Raiden* series has been wowing gamers for generations and one of the most desirable games in the franchise has just made its return. Currently available in Japan for all contemporary consoles, *Raiden III X Mikado Maniax* will feature over 20 arranged background tracks from artists such as GoSatoBan, Yu Shimoda and Daisuke Matsumoto, as well as new game modes. The game was only originally ported to the PS2 and copies are now expensive, so this new version is welcome indeed. A UK release has been planned for later this year.

A NEW TAKE ON CYBERPUNK

After releasing various music-based projects for the N64, Game Boy and SNES, the DJ Remute is planning another ambitious piece of work. *Decoder* is a 'musical visual novel' for the Mega Drive which is based on Muscha's 1984 film *Decoder*. You'll be able to view the movie while listening to a brand-new electro soundtrack that plays in real-time on Sega's 16-bit console. It's due to start shipping late-March and is available to preorder from bit.ly/remutemd

» We love how the fluorescent lights in the background match the striking artwork of the arcade cabinet.

» A remake of *Operation Wolf* is in the works, so this image feels particularly timely.

FANTASTIC REALMS

Danny Passarella discusses his videogame-themed art exhibition

Are videogames art? It's a subject that has been debated for years and is one artist Danny Passarella is well aware of, having created an exhibit called Fantasy Scenes all the way back in 2013 (we covered it in issue 130). He's now returned with a second exhibit, which continues to push the boundaries of videogames as an artistic medium in interesting ways.

"The first series ended up being exhibited and on display all around the world, from London to Paris, Tokyo and Beijing," Danny proudly tells us. "The machines take you to memories, whilst the colours of the artworks transport you into the fantasy realm. The overall image sits somewhere between the real and the imagined." Danny has also decided to make arcade games the focus for Fantasy Scenes 2, as he feels they perfectly encapsulate the theme he's exploring. "Escapism is a huge theme in these artworks and it just felt right doing them again," he continues. "The first exhibition was produced at a really difficult time in my life. The process of making the artworks helped me to cope by offering me a true and rewarding escape from the pressures surrounding me."

» For some reason we really want to play a game of *Tron*.

Whereas Fantasy Scenes used Danny's hometown of Whitley Bay for its numerous backgrounds, Fantasy Scenes 2 has a far broader canvas consisting of locations from a variety of places Danny has visited, including London, Bristol and Mallorca. One key theme from the first Fantasy Scenes remains though. "The original idea was that the arcade machines acted like the Monolith in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* and transformed the area from being run down to a utopian landscape," Danny says.

» Danny Passarella feels the public is much more accepting of videogames as art now. "It's different now. In general, gaming culture is absolutely huge."

Creating those otherworldly images isn't easy though, with Danny admitting that they need a fair bit of preparation. "I start off with sourcing the location, this usually means just walking an area for a few days and finding buildings or scenery that look interesting or have personality, before setting everything up to have it photographed," Danny says. "Then I look at sourcing the machine that will suit the location. Thankfully, this process is much easier now given the amount of arcade places I can turn to. Once the machine is photographed it's off to spend many days and hours on Photoshop, sewing everything together before sending everything off to postproduction."

The backdrops Danny painstakingly chooses cover all manner of locations, from lockers

» We can't think of a better backdrop for Midway's entertaining smash-'em-up.

» Danny is a big fan of Atari, so expect to see many games like *RoadBlasters* in the exhibit.

and shopfronts to stadiums and they're designed in such a way that they typically enhance Danny's chosen game in engaging ways. "Somehow the background will have a vague connection with an arcade game, for example a beach hut could work well with Sega's *Out Run* or a warehouse building with many floors has a feeling of the various platforms in *Donkey Kong*," Danny continues. "In general the buildings used are usually in some state of disrepair, something that the machine will magically repair by landing there."

Although the locations have been tricky to find in the past, one thing that has become easier for Danny is the acquisition of the arcade cabinets that are used. The first Fantasy Scenes saw Danny sending out around 500 emails to private collectors in the hope of securing pristine cabinets to photograph, but this time around it has been much easier due to the contacts Danny has acquired. "Places like Four Quarters have a warehouse full of vintage arcade machines which are kept in great condition so I can always plan a visit there," Danny says. "Alex [Crowley] who now runs his own Arcade Archive museum very kindly allowed me to shoot some of his cabinets sometime back, all kept in beautiful condition. Further afield I've met several private owners in places like France and Czech Republic who take great pride in their collections, so if required I can visit there."

> "Escapism is a huge theme in these artworks and it just felt right doing them again"
> **DANNY PASSARELLA**

If you're interested in viewing Fantasy Scenes 2 for yourself, Danny mentions that it will be on display in several exhibitions throughout the UK this year. A few exclusive works will be available as well. "The UK vintage arcade bar Four Quarters recently commissioned five exclusive artworks to be made to celebrate each of their venues: three in London, one in Bristol and one newly opened venue in Newcastle," explains Danny. "If you're in the area you can view these artworks on display at their Newcastle venue. Each of their other venues also have some of the first series on display."

Having photographed so many arcade cabinets over the last ten years we were keen to know if Danny held any particularly coin-op company in high regard. "It's a tough choice between Sega and Atari," he admits. "I imagine other people will have strong opinions on who they think was best but I'm going for Atari. Sega really made some incredible games with stunning cabinets but no one quite did it like Atari for me. Maybe it was because they were just slightly before some of the main Sega titles arriving so that first impression I got seems to have stuck with me."

Fantasy Scenes 2 will be on display in the spring. You can view the collection at passarella.co.uk/art

NEW ATARI HARDWARE

Atari and My Arcade has recently revealed three new hardware projects which are in the works. The Atari Micro Player is a miniature arcade unit that will play 100 classic Atari games, while the Atari Pocket Player is a handheld equivalent so you can play your games on the go. The final planned system is called the Gamestation Plus, a new console that plays Atari 2600, 7800 and arcade games. We'll hopefully have more news soon.

SHRUNKEN GRADIUS

Quite a few retro gamers are excited about Zuiki's incoming X68000 Z Mini Early Access Kit, a crowdfunded miniaturised version of Sharp's highly desirable home computer from 1987. While we've still have no idea if it will launch outside of Japan, a recent Tweet saw Zuiki sharing a short clip of *Gradius* being played on the device with a keyboard, which looked very impressive. The device is due to ship in March, so hopefully it will receive a wider launch at a later date.

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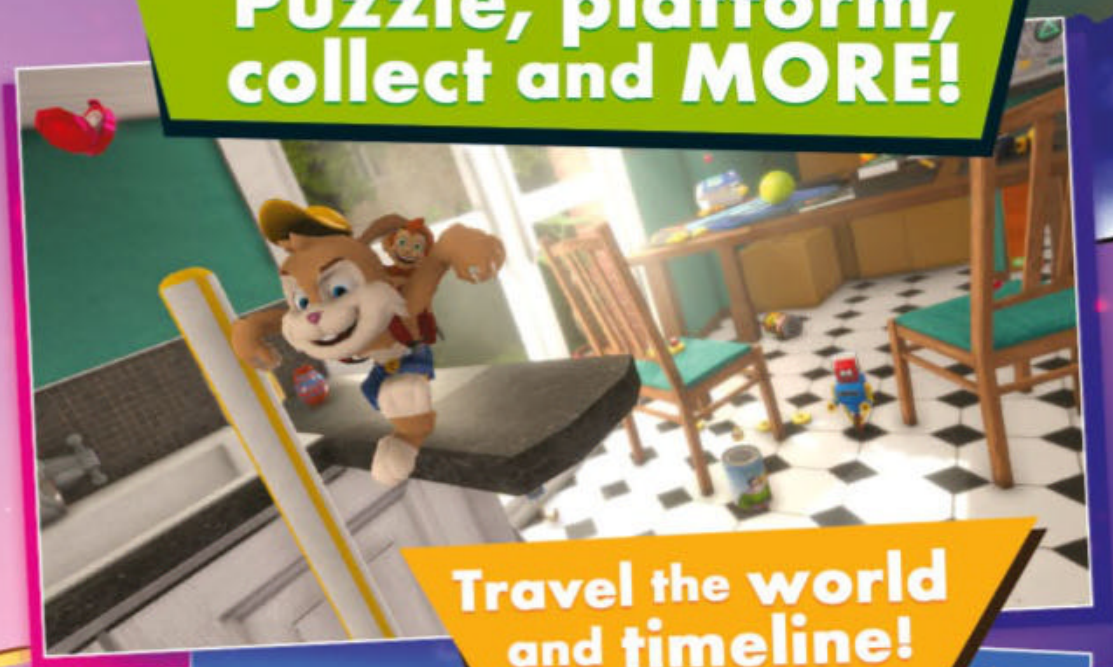

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NINTENDO SWITCH | PS5 | PS4 | STEAM | XBOX

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Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance broadcaster who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. Join him as he hosts a phone-in show and plays games at www.twitch.tv/iainlee and also check out www.patreon.com/iainandKatherine

Gaming prejudice

In a column for Retro Gamer that I wrote years ago, I dissed the VIC-20. I did it for a laugh, thinking it would create a bit of back and forth and that most people agreed that the VIC was a bit rubbish. I might as well have done a whoopsie on a picture of The Queen. It kicked off. People wrote in, furious that I called a console that meant so much to them a 'brick'. People tweeted abuse at me. I was genuinely surprised that anyone would take a throwaway comment like that so seriously. I shouldn't have been. We are all very protective and passionate about our hobbies and if we see someone attacking our pastime, we take it very personally.

Like I say, this was years ago, but for some reason it popped into my head today. I'm in a very different space as we lurch into 2023 than I was back then. I've got just over two years clean and sober under my belt and I've qualified as a counsellor. I like to think I've grown up somewhat. And while I still don't rate the VIC, I would never be so aggressive as to refer to it as a 'brick'. I also have a lot more empathy and if that thing that looks like a bread bin (that's a description of its physical shape, not a criticism) means something to you, I'm not gonna rain on your parade.

My VIC-20 outburst was based on some experience. I had a friend who had one and I just never really liked it. It didn't compare to his Speccy or my BBC. Sure, we had hours of fun playing *Hunchback*, but it always left me feeling a bit cold. It got me thinking about other gaming prejudices I still hold. There are computers that I have never touched in my life that I absolutely hate. The Amstrad CPC 464 is one. [Outrageous – Ed] Please, this is not a dig at any of you and I'm not attacking you if you have a relationship with these machines. There's just something about the Amstrad that to my mind looks… cheap. Yeah, that's the word. It looks cheap. [That's a fair point – Ed] And the graphics seemed very blocky. Why should that put me off? I have absolutely no idea. Prejudices aren't based on facts, they're based on emotions. I don't remember any of my friends having one and I don't think I touched it in the computer department in Boots back in the day.

Another computer that turns my stomach is the Oric. There was something about it being so small and those annoying little thin keys. The Oric looked smug. I'm sure if I sat down with one now, I'd have a thoroughly decent half hour playing it, but I can honestly say that will probably never happen.

It can't be the gaming power of those machines. I hold a huge soft spot for the ZX81 and that really was rubbish. (OK, I'm being a bit mischievous just leaving that sentence hanging…) So what is it that makes me hate something I have never touched? Am I alone with these feelings? I'd love for you to get in touch and let me know if there are things in the gaming world you detest but could not put up a decent argument why. *

> "Another computer that turns my stomach is the Oric"

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Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000.

Upstaged by Mario

Do kids still bring toys in on the last day of term? My many, many children are all grown up now, but I don't remember them ever taking anything into school before the summer break.

My sister's husband was an airline steward, and he'd often come home from various international trips, with knock-off tat from far-flung places. Markets in Hong Kong seemed to be a particular treasure trove. Once I got into music, around the age of 14, he'd ask me if there were any albums I wanted – and then sure enough would return with them on tape. Usually, there'd be something slightly wrong with them; poorly translated tracklistings, or songs that weren't on the original, legitimate, album.

On a couple of occasions, he brought me back a handheld LCD game. The one that remains most vivid in my memory was solar-powered, a game in which you played a postman balancing a tall stack of packages.

I took that into school on the last day of term like I was cock of the classroom, expecting everyone to be gathered around me, cooing and awestruck. Unfortunately, I was upstaged by a couple of other boys who each had a Nintendo Game & Watch. One had *Mario's Cement Factory* – a thrilling adventure in which Mario had to pull levers to deposit cement into mixers. This got a lot of attention. The other boy, though, was king for the day; he had brought in *Mario Bros* – a double-screen monster, which opened like a book.

This wasn't the *Mario Bros* that came later in arcades and the NES (and, indeed, a few years ago, in the form of a brand-new anniversary edition Game & Watch). This had the two brothers working in yet another factory, loading bottles onto a truck – passing them to one another along conveyor belts that spanned the two screens.

Sounds mundane, but man… it was a showstopper. My wobbly postman game, with its flickering, solar-powered, graphics, didn't get a look in.

I suspect this day was significant in that it might've been the first time I became in any way aware of Mario, and that he was obviously a pretty big deal to Nintendo. Secondly, I immediately coveted a Game & Watch of my own.

I began a campaign of parental harassment, and, fortunately, didn't have long to wait. My birthday was over the school summer holidays, and that year my parents bought me the classic *Donkey Kong*. It had been out a while already by this point – its orange clamshell already quietly iconic. I'm not sure if I was ever aware that the protagonist was the same character from the *Mario* games I'd seen at school, but *Donkey Kong* I already knew from the arcades.

I mean, I was terrible at it. I don't think I ever made it to the top of the building site more than a couple of times, but I loved that game. The fact I could carry it around with me, I could open it up and play it on the bus, it meant so much. The hardware was a brilliant bit of design in and of itself, even if – whisper it – the game itself wasn't exactly like having an arcade in your pocket. *

> "My birthday was over the school summer holidays, and that year my parents bought me the classic Donkey Kong"

Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at:

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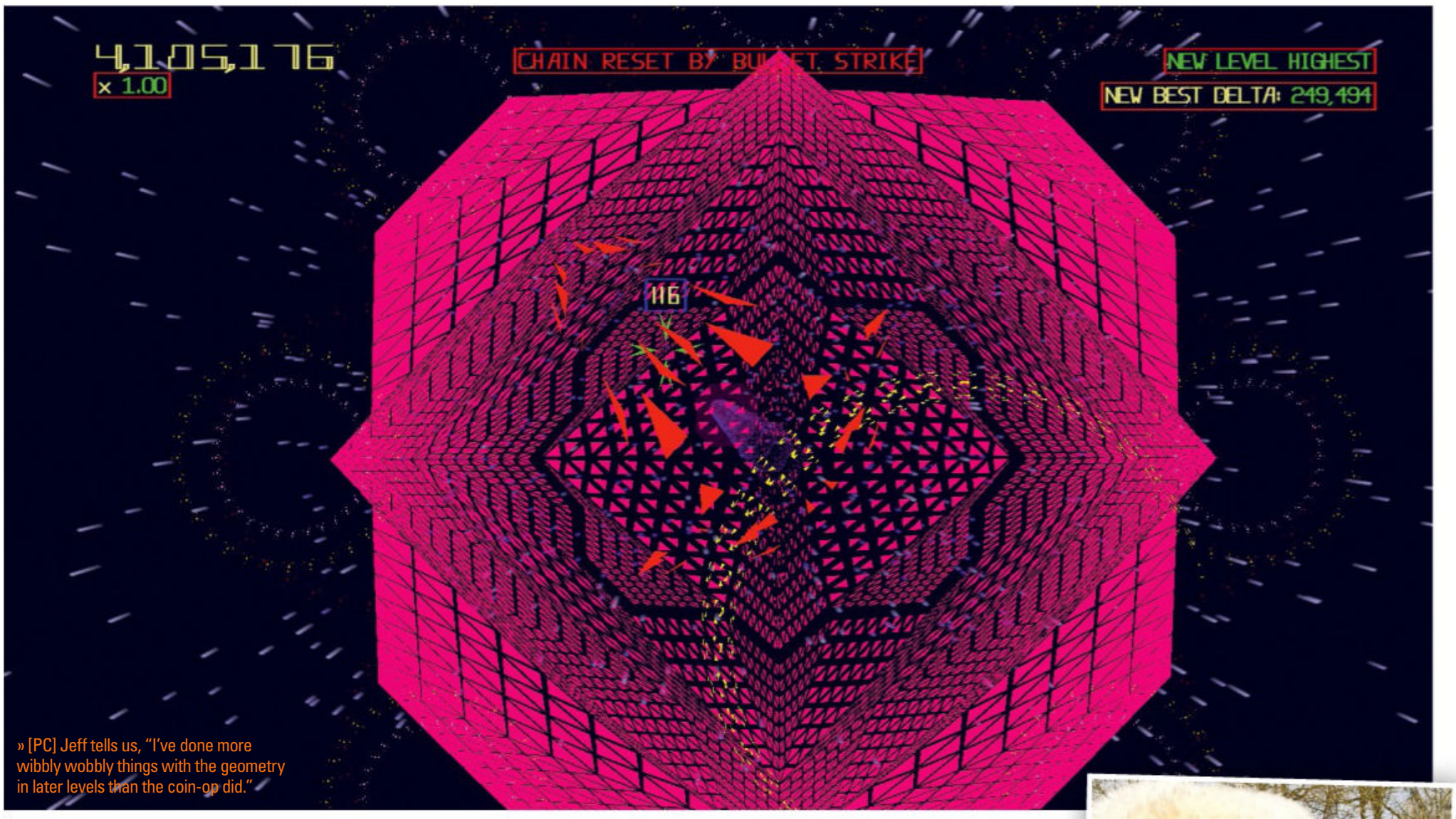


» [PC] Jeff tells us, "I've done more wibbly wobbly things with the geometry in later levels than the coin-op did."

Akka Arrh

Jeff Minter on revitalising a lost Atari gem

One of the highlights of *Atari 50: The Anniversary Celebration* was the resurrection of *Akka Arrh* by Digital Eclipse. It would appear that Atari isn't done with its lost game as Jeff Minter has now placed his own unique spin on it. We had a chat with him to find out how it happened.

So Jeff, how did you come to work on this new version of *Akka Arrh*?
There had been talk with Atari about possibly doing some updated versions of things in their IP catalogue. I'd been interested in *Akka Arrh* since I first heard about it, and the whole story of the game ROMs being held secret by a collector and then 'liberated' so everyone could have a go.

» [Switch] "I liked the abstract nature of it, the flower-like shape of the platforms, the back and forth context switch between upstairs and downstairs." Jeff on the original arcade game.

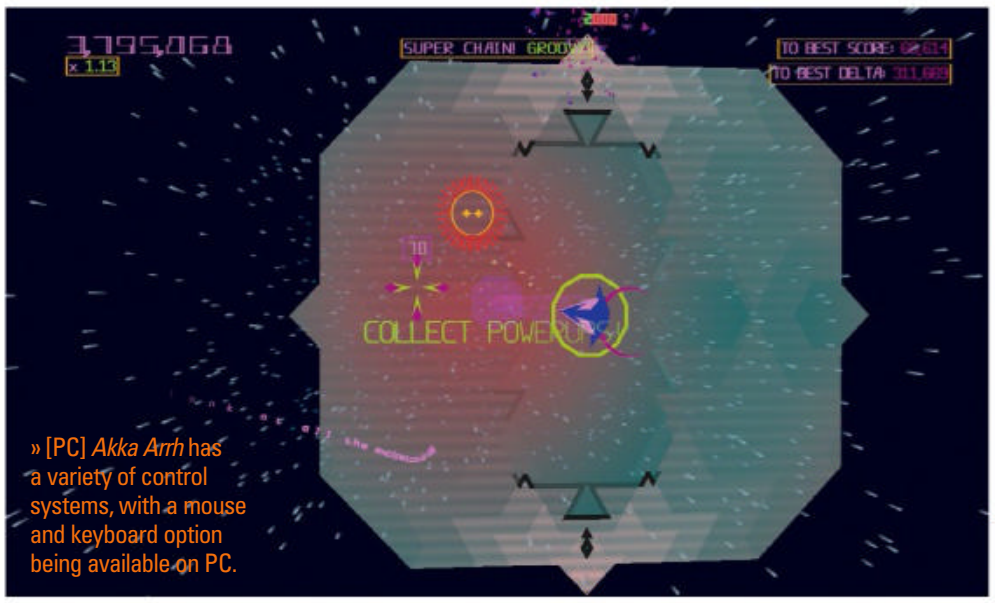
Were you able to play an original *Akka Arrh* cabinet before working on this remake?
No, I think there's only like three cabs in existence and they don't make it out to any expos in Europe. I did get a hold of the liberated ROMs and used them in MAME though.

The original game was reportedly not successful during location tests due to its difficulty. What's your take on that?
I can kind of understand it. The game is interesting, has some cool ideas, but it doesn't quite fit together in a way that's satisfying. Everything happens a bit too quickly, I think you have to switch between upstairs and downstairs rather too often. I like the ideas in the game but I just think it's a bit too hectic and the route to good play isn't clear enough to hook players cleanly and have them coming back for more.

Akka Arrh will be unfamiliar to many players. How would you describe the game to them?
It's basically a tower defence game where *you* are the tower. Swarms of enemies attack your tower; you attempt to destroy them before they reach you. If they do reach you they go downstairs and inflict damage; it's up to you to go down there and sort them out before they run away. Whilst upstairs you can use your shots to light up entire sections of the terrain and instantly kill any enemies there. Levels have different shapes which affect how easily you can perform this mass extinction.

» Jeff Minter has enjoyed a long-standing working relationship with Atari. *Akka Arrh* is their latest collaboration.

Did the fact that you were working with a lesser-known



» [PC] *Akka Arrh* has a variety of control systems, with a mouse and keyboard option being available on PC.

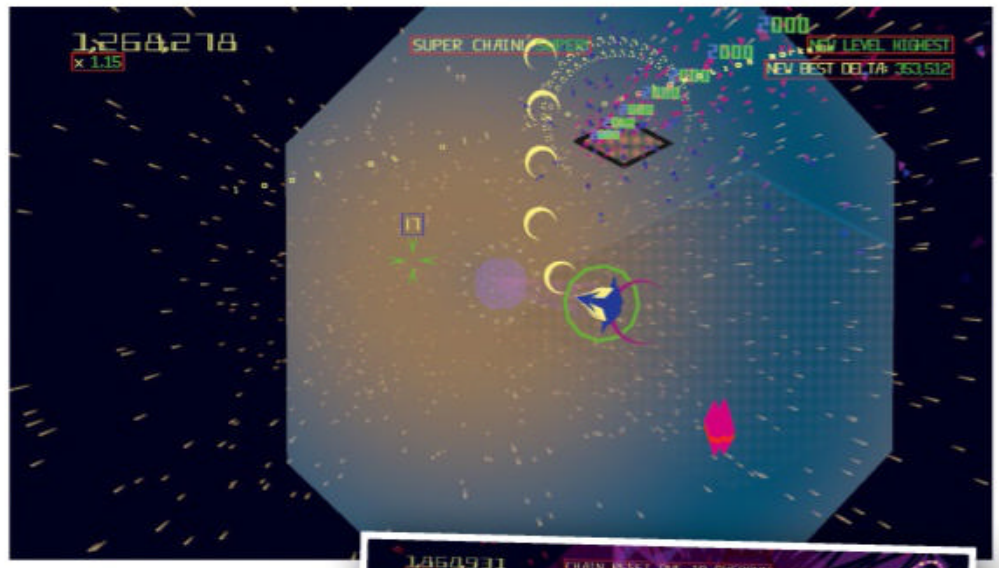
game change your approach to its game design?
It meant that I had to cut rather more deeply than I did with *Tempest 2000*, for example. I changed more stuff from the original design than I would if I'd been working with a great classic. I had to make it go from 'interesting, but a bit meh' to 'interesting and fun'. It took me a good while before I made it work to my satisfaction, to be honest.

> "I'd been interested in Akka Arrh since I first heard about it"
>
> **JEFF MINTER**

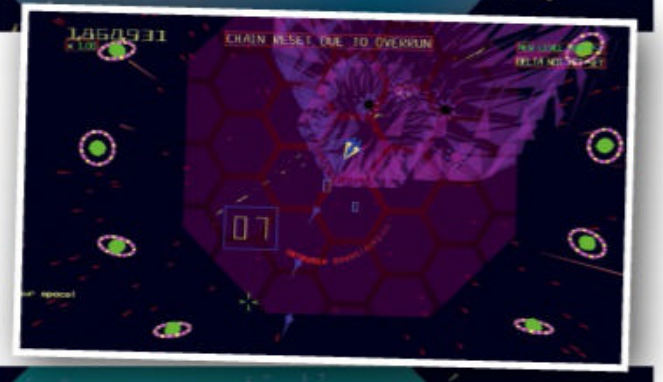
The most noticeable change is how bombs work – rather than taking out a whole sector of enemies simultaneously, they create explosions that chain together, a bit like those in *Missile Command* or *Every Extend*. What's the thinking behind this?
I wanted to introduce a chain-scoring mechanic where nailing successive enemies would increment a bonus multiplier, and for that I wanted something that would operate over a period of time rather than instantly like the lit up panels in the original. So I used distance field Shock Waves on the surfaces that expand over time, and had it like *Missile Command* in that once initiated, shot enemies would themselves create their own Shock Wave.

What's the difference between bombs and shots?
Bombs create a Shock Wave, *but* using one resets the score multiplier to zero. You could just spam bombs all the time, there's an endless supply and you can kill a lot of enemies that way – but you'll score zero points for each one! You can fire bullets and they don't reset the multiplier, but they are a finite resource – you get given them for destroying enemies in Shock Waves. They can be used to shoot normal enemies and also ones that fly over the surface and can't be hit with Shock Waves.

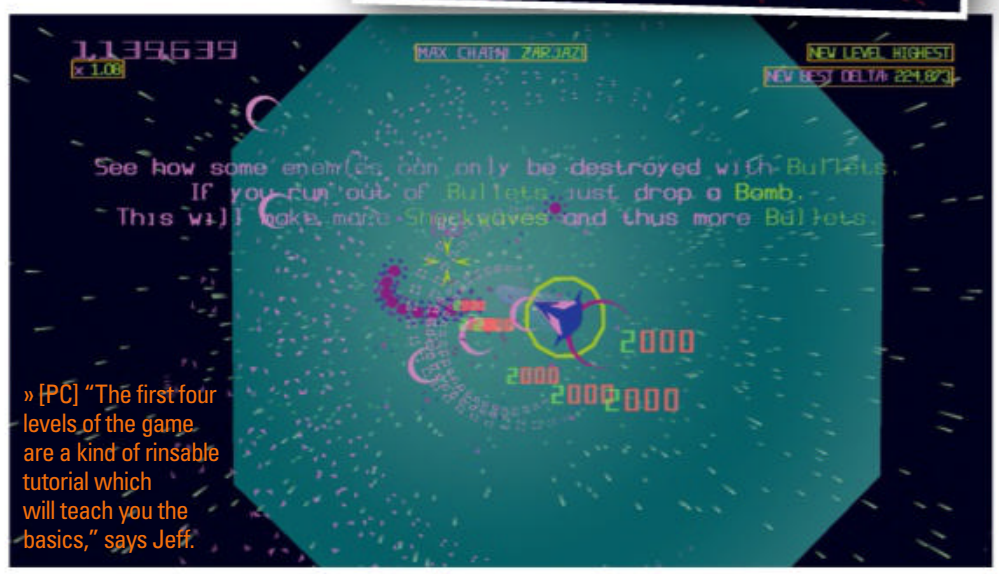
Which other aspects of the game are new to your version?
I wanted the enemies to have a more visible mission than just 'go downstairs and do damage for a bit and then run away', so I made up some Energy Pods that they have to steal. You lose the game by losing all the pods. Some enemies go down there, snatch the pods and come upstairs with them to drag them away; you can intercept them and retrieve the pods. Later on there are enemies which will just go downstairs and sit there eating pods unless you intervene. There are others that can yoink up pods via traction beams without going downstairs at all. I've also slowed things down and made the game less aggressive, as I usually do when updating a coin-op for home play. It's almost like a cross between a shooter and a puzzle game now. One friend described it as "cerebral", not something anyone would normally say about my shooty things.



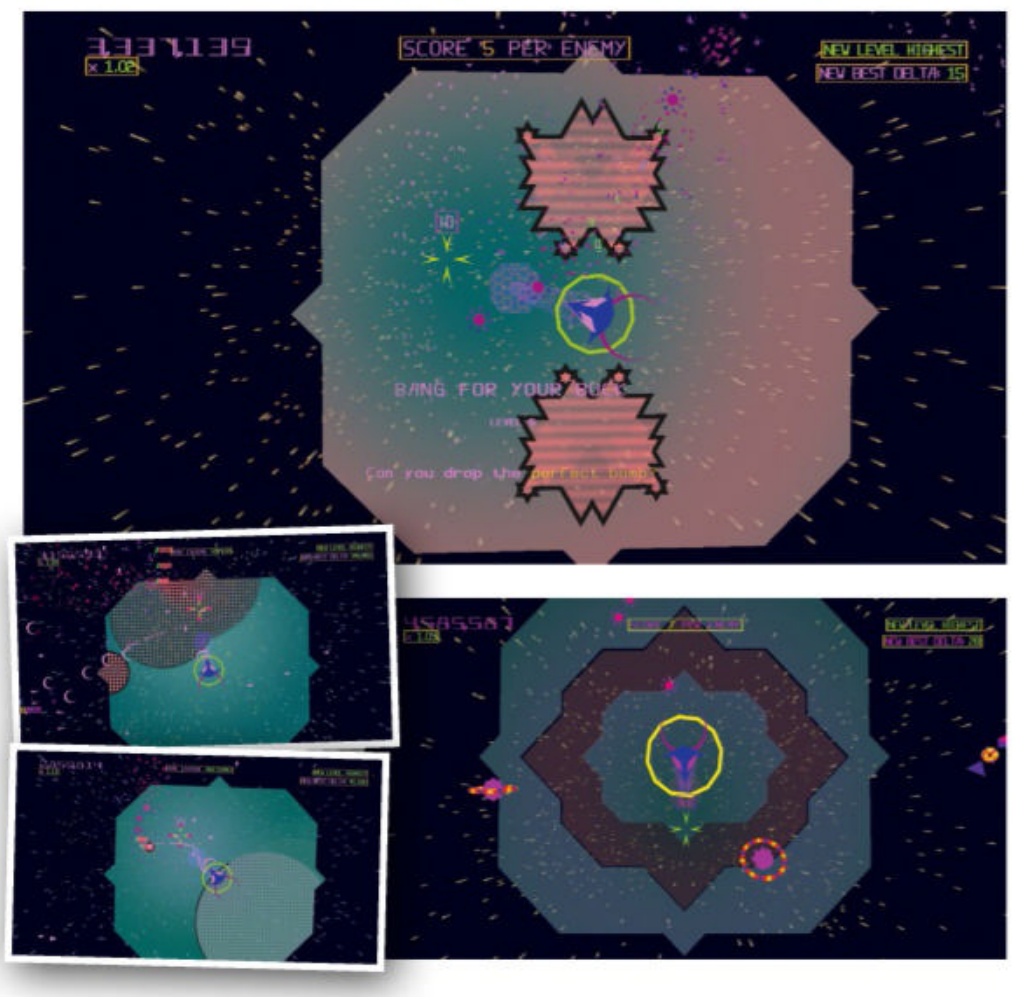
» [PC] Saving bullets is a must as Jeff says, "You get awarded an end-of-level bonus for any bullets you have left unused."



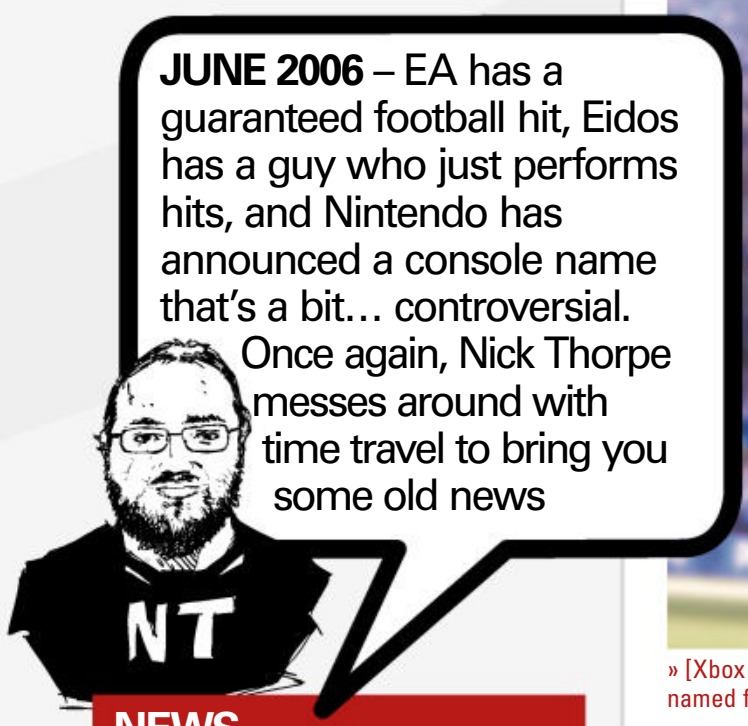
» [PC] There's not as much switching between levels like in the original coin-op. "There's less frantic nipping up and down stairs to interrupt the flow," explains Jeff.



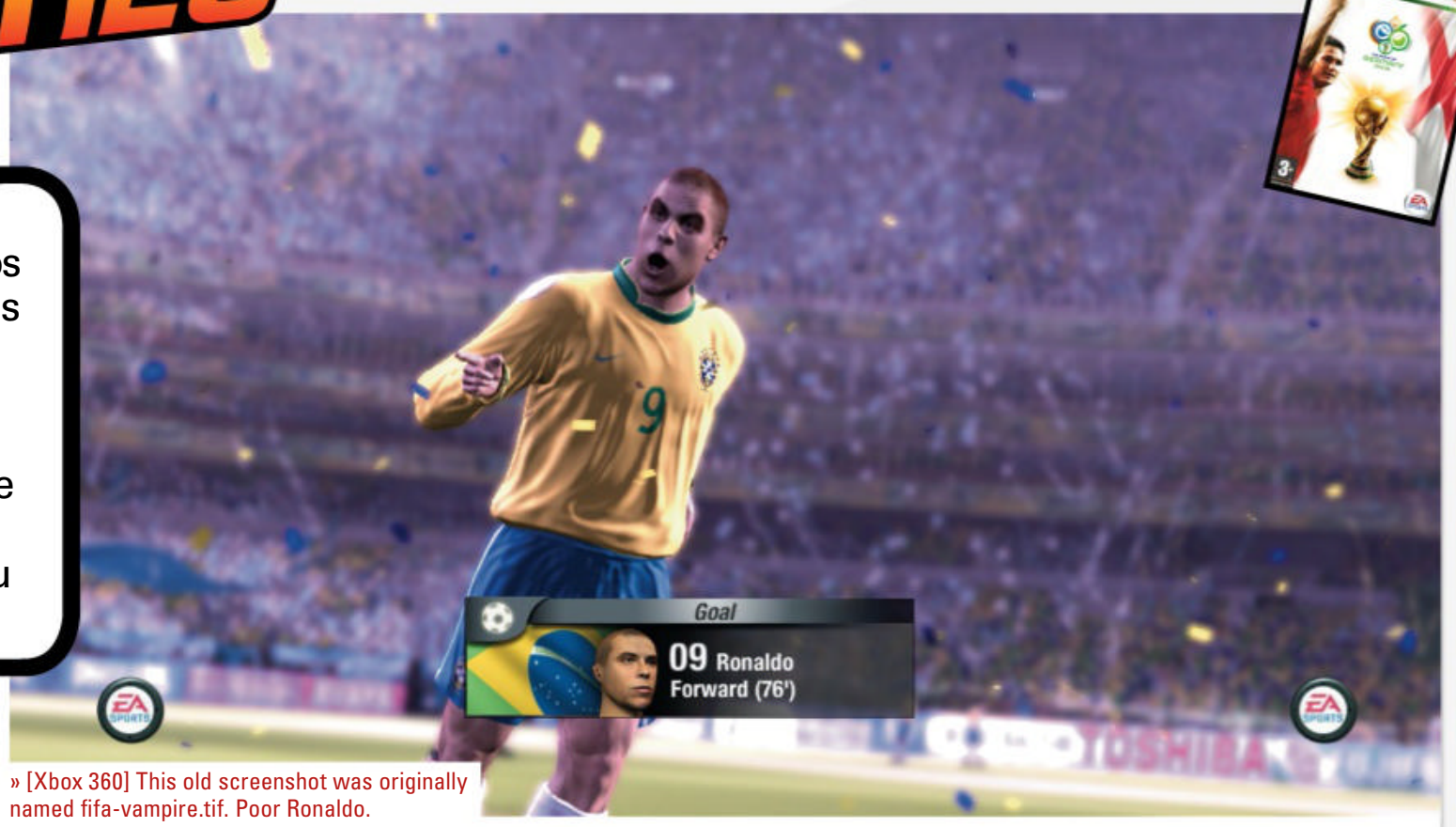
» [PC] "The first four levels of the game are a kind of rinsable tutorial which will teach you the basics," says Jeff.



BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES



JUNE 2006 – EA has a guaranteed football hit, Eidos has a guy who just performs hits, and Nintendo has announced a console name that's a bit… controversial. Once again, Nick Thorpe messes around with time travel to bring you some old news



» [Xbox 360] This old screenshot was originally named fifa-vampire.tif. Poor Ronaldo.

NEWS JUNE 2006

The last vestiges of the former state of Yugoslavia came to an end this month, as Montenegro and Serbia declared independence on 3 and 5 June respectively. The split was triggered by a referendum in Montenegro in May, in which 55.5% of voters supported independence. However, the two nations would play as a single team for the final time in the World Cup, which started on 9 June.

On 15 June, Bill Gates announced his intention to step down from his daily duties at Microsoft, with successors Ray Ozzie and Craig Mundie set to fully take over his role by 2008. Then the world's richest man, Gates expressed a desire to spend more time on philanthropy via the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, one of the world's wealthiest charitable foundations.

Ronaldo broke Gerd Muller's record for the most World Cup goals on 27 June. Having scored two goals against Japan during the group stage, the Brazilian phenomenon beat Ghana's goalkeeper Richard Kingson in the round of 16, taking his total tally to 15 across three tournaments. This would be his last international goal, as mounting injuries kept him out of consideration for his national team after the tournament's conclusion.

THE LATEST NEWS FROM JUNE 2006

Nintendo had finally confirmed Wii as the official name of the console hitherto known by the codename Revolution, with the company claiming that, "Wii sounds like 'we', which emphasises this console is for everyone." Nintendo's UK PR manager Rob Saunders was quoted as saying, "The names of our competitors indicate a beefed-up version of what they already offer. The name Wii demonstrates that the system is something totally new to the world of gaming." Reactions were mixed to say the least. *Official Nintendo Magazine* was dutifully positive in calling it an "unusual name", but *NGC* left subtlety at the door and noted that "it sounds like a bodily function". More damningly, *games™* described the announcement as "possibly the day that Nintendo threw the towel into the next-generation ring".

With monster sales virtually assured, EA might not have worried about the reviews for *FIFA World Cup: Germany 2006*. That's probably for the best, as the Xbox 360 version scored 2/5 in *360*, 3/10 in *games™* and 3/10 in *X-360*, which felt it to be "far too lightweight, unrealistic and tactically inept" next to the *Pro Evolution Soccer* series. The *Official Xbox 360 Magazine* also felt that it wasn't as good as Konami's games but gave it 7/10, calling it "the best of a limited choice" on the platform. Other versions earned respectable scores – the *Official PlayStation 2 Magazine* gave it 8/10, *Go Play* awarded the PSP version 72%, while the GameCube version got 72% from *NGC* and 59% from *ONM*.

Agent 47 returned for some more cold-blooded killing in *Hitman: Blood Money*, and it received strong review scores across all formats – 9/10 from *Official PS2*, 80% from *Play*, 8.1/10 from *Official Xbox Magazine*, 8/10 from *Official Xbox 360* and 85% from *PC Gamer*. *Official PS2* felt that "the AI is almost always impressively logical", while *PC Gamer* applauded the fact that "every player will decide on different solutions". If you liked your violence overt rather than covert, *Rogue Trooper* might have satisfied you. The third-person shooter adaptation of the 2000 AD comic received a broadly warm reception, including scores of 7/10 from *Edge*, 84% from *PC Gamer* and 8.8/10 from *OXM*, which considered it to be a "beautifully accessible game" that ensured

» Don't worry about the silly name, urine for a treat. [Nick, are you 12? – Ed.]

» [PSP] After a disappointing PS2 outing, Gabe Logan's handheld adventure was a return to form.

» [DS] It might not be a game in the traditional sense, but *Brain Training* sold in its millions.

"you'll never look at obscure game licences in the same way again".

PC Gamer enjoyed *Rise Of Nations: Rise Of Legends*, scoring it 87%. It felt the real-time strategy game could feel "a tad generic" but praised the development team for a bizarre mixture of influences that led to interesting battle situations. *Edge* also gave it 8/10. On the GameCube, *Chibi-Robo* impressed *ONM*, which claimed that it "wallows in the excitement of exploration like nothing else". *GamesMaster* wasn't quite as enamoured, offering it 76%. PS2 platforming sequel *Ape Escape 3* scored 82% in *GamesMaster* and 87% in *Play*, with the former praising the introduction of new personas including the knight and ninja. Also on the PS2, *Dragon Quest: Journey Of The Cursed King* scored 92% in *GamesMaster* and 90% in *Play*, the latter feeling that the voice acting set the game apart from other RPGs.

PSP owners had a bit of a bumper month, with *Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror* being the highlight with scores including 87% from *GamesMaster*, 90% from *Play* and 9/10 in *Official PS2*. *Go Play* awarded it 93%, feeling that it offered "a perfect balance of action and sneaking that throws up enough surprises to keep you interested". Less impressed, *games™* awarded it 7/10, praising the "impressive" visuals but criticising "distinctly antiquated" level design and mission structure. *Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble* earned 8/10 in *Official PS2* and 82% in *Play*, with the latter feeling that the new *Smash Bros*-style format "lends itself extremely well to the pick-up-and-play world of portable gaming". If neither of those tickled your fancy, a competent port of *Tomb Raider: Legend* (78% *Go Play*, 72% *Play*, 7/10 *OPS2*) was also available.

Lastly, the Nintendo DS gained *Dr Kawashima's Brain Training*. This earned 78% in *ONM*, 80% in *GamesMaster* and 80% in *NGC*, which claimed that the game offered a unique "feeling of time well spent". However, *games™* felt that "it may prove to be too much of an ideology clash for some westerners" and gave it 6/10.

Join us again next month, when we'll be pondering the size of enemy crabs. ✱

» [Xbox 360] This is how you'd have felt if you didn't buy *Hitman: Blood Money* this month.

» [PC] This spell is sure to wipe out those pesky scorpion robot things.

CHARTS

JUNE 2006

PLAYSTATION 2

1 – Tomb Raider: Legend (Eidos)
2 – Ice Age 2: The Meltdown (Vivendi)
3 – Buzz!: The Big Quiz (Sony)
4 – The Godfather (EA)
5 – FIFA Street 2 (EA)

XBOX 360

1 – Tomb Raider: Legend (Eidos)
2 – Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter (Ubisoft)
3 – The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (Take 2)
4 – Battlefield 2: Modern Combat (EA)
5 – Final Fantasy XI (Square Enix)

GAMECUBE

1 – Sonic Riders (Sega)
2 – Pokémon XD: Gale Of Darkness (Nintendo)
3 – FIFA Street 2 (EA)
4 – Ice Age 2: The Meltdown (Vivendi)
5 – Odama (Nintendo)

MUSIC

1 – Maneater (Nelly Furtado)
2 – I Wish I Was A Punk Rocker (Sandi Thom)
3 – World At Your Feet (Embrace)
4 – Monster (The Automatic)
5 – Crazy (Gnarls Barkley)

THIS MONTH IN...

NGC

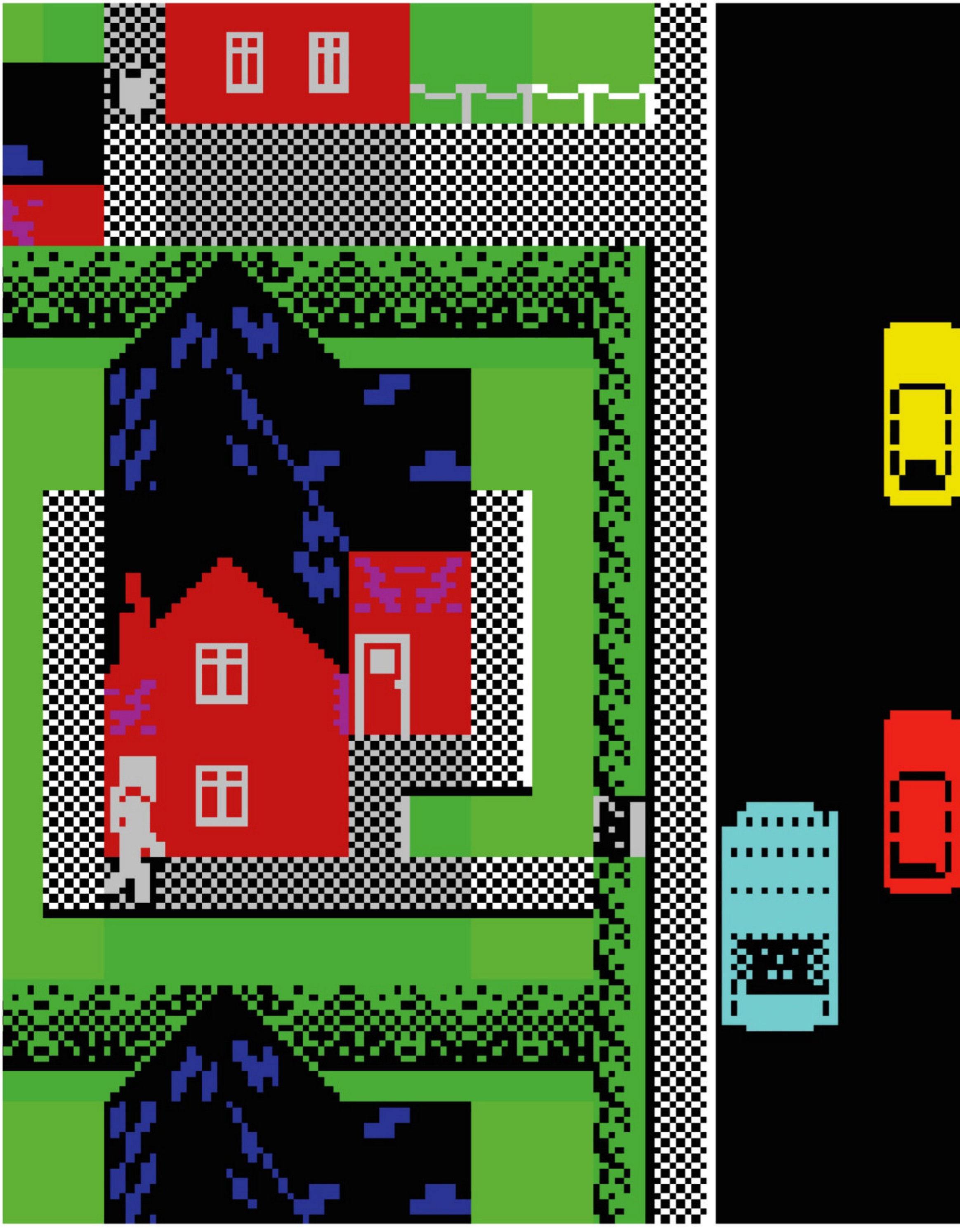
The dwindling fortunes of the GameCube mean that this is the end of the line for *NGC*. Editor Martin Kitts promises that the spirit of *Super Play*, *N64* and *NGC* will be "very much in evidence" in its forthcoming replacement.

Official PlayStation 2 Magazine

Edge and Lita reveal that WWE has banned PSPs backstage. "It's because guys were playing right up until their ring music hit," says Edge. "They'd pause then run out and wrestle and run back and start playing again!"

Official Xbox 360 Magazine

Reader Kelvin Amos asks how he can get a job in games journalism. "Knowing stuff about old games – not much help," reads the caption accompanying a *Street Fighter II* screenshot. We'll see ourselves out, then.



Trashman

CLEANING UP THE STREETS

» ZX SPECTRUM » 1984 » NEW GENERATION SOFTWARE

During my 20s I applied for a job as a refuse collector, which involved a fair bit of driving. I didn't get the job because I reversed the lorry I was driving around a corner and nearly hit a parked car, but I did enjoy the interview process. I remember being asked what previous experience I had and I cheekily replied that I had played a lot of *Trashman* on the Spectrum growing up, so I would be perfect. Luckily, the guy interviewing me knew the game and started to laugh, quickly telling me that the real thing wasn't nearly as exciting, or dangerous. He probably had a point, because if I had to experience the crap that went on in *Trashman* I'd have probably quit the job shortly after getting it.

Although it's not quite up to the slickness of Ultimate's early games, there's still a lovely arcade-like feel to Malcolm Evans' *Trashman*. The aim of the game is to simply travel a number of streets (all based on real-life locations in Bath), empty dustbins and then return them to their original positions. Clear enough and you'll move on to the next street. It sounds easy, but there's a number of things that make your task difficult. The first is a tight time limit, which means you need to plan your route effectively, as stepping on customers' lawns will cause your time to drop rapidly. You also have to deal with a rather aggressive canine, a busy road that needs constant crossing and your own garbage truck which slowly moves up the screen and will kill you if you foolishly pass in front of it.

It's tough, but *Trashman* holds up exceptionally well and remains a frantic, fast-paced affair. It's probably a good thing I was passed over for that job, my poor back wouldn't be able to handle it now. ✱

THE 80S

A DECADE OF INCREDIBLE GAMES

THE EIGHTIES WAS A TUMULTUOUS DECADE OF TECHNOLOGICAL TRIUMPHS AND PIONEERING CONCEPTS, AND AS A RESULT IT IS PERHAPS THE MOST-INTERESTING TEN YEARS IN GAMING HISTORY. JOIN US AS WE REMINISCE ABOUT THE REMARKABLE GAMES THAT WERE PRODUCED IN THIS GOLDEN ERA

WORDS BY NICK THORPE AND DARRAN JONES

If there is one thing that you can't accuse Retro Gamer of, it is wallowing in nostalgia. Oh, *alright then* – we're not exactly Luddites around here but as we're sure you will all know, we are sometimes partial to expressing the notion that, just maybe, they don't make them like they used to. But when it comes to the Eighties, doesn't that actually seem like a fair thing to say?

We're not just waving the retro flag for the sake of it, gaming really was different back then. For a start, there was the rapid pace of technological change. We went from monochrome machines with a single kilobyte of memory at the start of the decade, to the growing acceptance of polygon-pushing powerhouses in arcades at the end. Anyone gaming ten years ago could probably have imagined the games of today, but there was no chance that anyone growing up on *Pac-Man* could have realistically expected the likes of *Out Run* by the middle of the decade, let alone *Populous* at the end.

The level of professionalism was different too, as creatives and business folk alike tried to work out how to handle an emerging industry. While the indie spirit has returned to gaming in recent years, it's sobering to remember that as the business grew during the Nineties and beyond, we spent a long time with risk-averse publishers who wouldn't have touched something like *Skool Daze* or any of Llamasoft's more unusual fare. Nobody in the first half of the decade could have realistically foreseen the attempts by Nintendo and other console manufacturers to restrict what content gamers were exposed to.

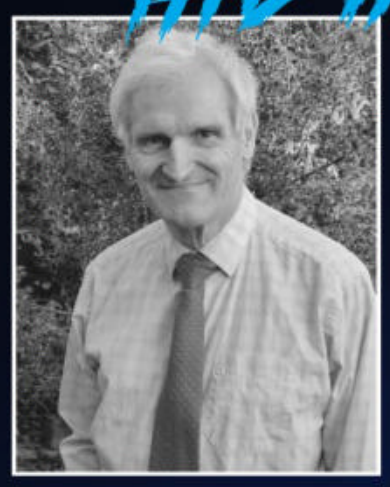
Of course, everything was also filtered through the lens of Eighties pop culture and current events. The Cold War was still at the forefront of people's minds, gory horror was in vogue as the video nasties made their way into our homes, and plenty of blockbuster movies made their mark too. There was even a little bit of political commentary at play, as the likes of *Wanted: Monty Mole* will prove.

But for all the technological, market and cultural forces at work, it was the games that made the decade so exciting to live through, and in this feature we'll be charting the course of the decade year by year with the focus on the software. Along the way, we'll examine the trends that swept the industry, as well as picking out the key games that shaped and reshaped our understanding of what our still-young hobby could offer us. So sit back, grab some Space Raiders and your fizzy drink of choice, and join us for a look back at a time when gaming really was different.

» [ZX Spectrum] Matthew Smith's *Jet Set Willy* made its way into many bedrooms during the Eighties.

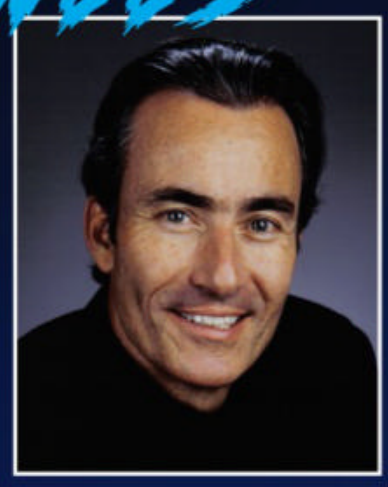
THE INTERVIEWEES

VAN BURNHAM
Author, *Supercade: A Visual History Of The Videogame Age*



MALCOLM EVANS
Programmer, *3D Monster Maze, 3D Tunnel and more*

DAVID CRANE
Cofounder, Activision. Programmer, *Kaboom!, Ghostbusters* and more

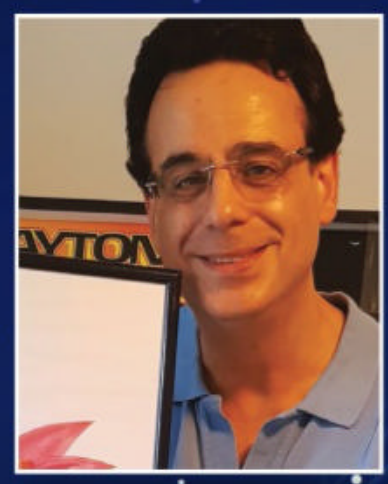


TRIP HAWKINS
Founder, Electronic Arts. Founder, The 3DO Company. Entrepreneur

CHRIS WILD
Programmer, *The Lords Of Midnight* remakes, *Cyberwar* and more

EUGENE JARVIS
Programmer, *Defender, Robotron: 2084* and more

PHILIP OLIVER
Programmer, *Dizzy, Super Robin Hood* and more



TONY TAKOUSHI
Games journalist, *CVG, Big K* and more

JIM BAGLEY
Programmer, *Defender* (Game Boy), *Gutz* and more

DEFINING GAMES

ADVENTURE

DEVELOPER: ATARI INC

When Warren Robinett sent players on a quest to recover a magical chalice from dangerous dragons, he unknowingly created the DNA that would seep into all later action-based adventure games.

PAC-MAN

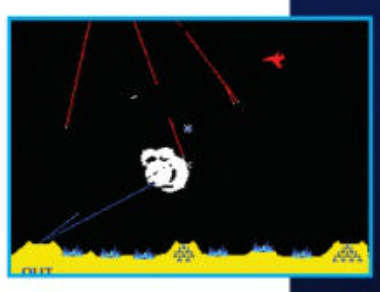
DEVELOPER: NAMCO

Clever programming of *Pac-Man*'s ghost antagonists and compulsive play mechanics turned it into a world-wide smash. Pac-Man is arguably gaming's first recognisable icon, and he is still going strong today.

MISSILE COMMAND

DEVELOPER: ATARI INC

Dave Theurer's game may have been fuelled by Cold War nightmares, but it delivered intense blasting thrills and highlighted just how useful a trackball was if you wanted lightning-fast gameplay.



SPACE INVADERS

DEVELOPER: ATARI INC

It might not have been that authentic to look at, but Atari's ambitious conversion of Taito's coin-op hit was arguably the first example of a AAA console release and included loads of different game modes.

PHOENIX

DEVELOPER: TAITO

Blessed with multi-stage gameplay, huge swooping birds and chaotic action, *Phoenix* certainly left an impression on gamers. Its impressively huge boss, while not the first of its kind, remains equally memorable.

MYSTERY HOUSE

DEVELOPER: ON-LINE SYSTEMS

Text adventures were well-known to gamers by the late-Seventies, but Roberta Williams' horror-tinged classic added graphics to the mix and created a whole new genre when it appeared in 1980.

ROGUE

DEVELOPER: AI DESIGN

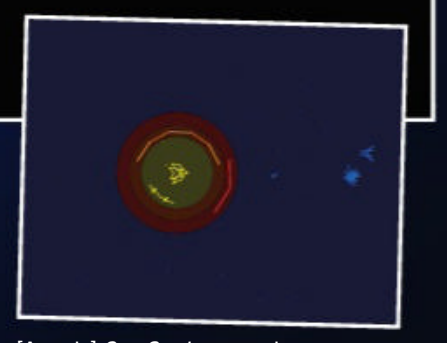
With its focus on exploring and permadeath being an ever-present threat, battling your way through *Rogue*'s hellish dungeons was equally thrilling and terrifying. The roguelike genre began here.

STAR RAIDERS

DEVELOPER: ATARI INC

Doug Neubauer's hectic space combat sim felt ahead of the curve when it debuted on Atari's 8-bit micros. It proves just how capable home computers could be in the right hands and delivered arcade-like thrills.

» [Arcade] Atari's *Battlezone* typified the militaristic themes of many games of its era.



» [Arcade] *Star Castle* was rather more abstract in its presentation of a shooting game.

1980

To say that 1980 was a time of transition would be an understatement, as the gaming world was still adjusting to proper colour displays, cartridge-based games, computers in affluent homes and the first Game & Watches. One particular innovation that kicked the decade off with a bang was character, with Pac-Man and his ghostly pursuers making big waves simply for being something different to a car, tank or spaceship.

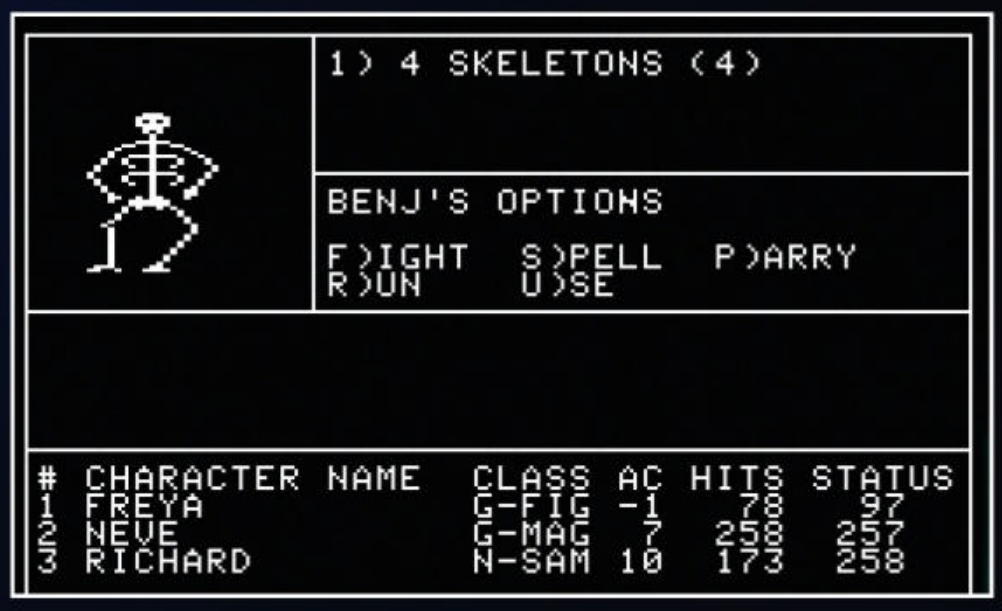
Elsewhere, Cold War paranoia still had a firm grip on the minds of many, as demonstrated by *Battlezone* – the vector tank combat game that was reworked into The Bradley Trainer for the US army. *Armor Attack* was another vector game with a distinctive military theme. Those two could at least function as a power fantasy, which is more than could be said for *Missile Command*.

Fortunately, more fanciful fare could be found elsewhere in the arcades, with driving being a popular choice. Namco used vehicles as a vehicle (pardon the wordplay) for a new maze game in the form of *Rally-X*, which allowed players the proactive option of smoking out pursuing cars to defend themselves. Data East's *Highway Chase* also did something odd with cars, using them as the basis for a shoot-'em-up game that had more in common with *Space Invaders* than something like *Monaco GP*. *Star Castle* dropped all of that stuff and went abstract, though shooting was still the order of the day thanks to games like *Phoenix* and *Berzerk*.

In the home, Atari's 2600 version of *Space Invader*s wasn't just the first licensed arcade game ever, but the first game to sell over a million copies. Meanwhile, projects from the Seventies were going professional, as the text adventure *Zork* came off the mainframes and was given a full release as *Zork I* by the noted text adventure publisher Infocom. Graphic adventures such as *Mystery House* also started to appear courtesy of studios like On-Line Systems.

DAN BURNHAM ON PAC-MAN

"1980. It was a year that defined a paradigm shift that forever changed tech and pop culture. CNN, Rubik's Cube, and – most important – *Pac-Man* debuted that year. Namco's oddly addictive maze game hit and hit hard, quickly positioning itself as the most-important game of the 20th century. Nobody was immune to its hypnotic blue haze as players of every age, gender and profession filled game rooms to maximum capacity. This era was an incalculable influence on me and still informs my work and career, leading me to write the original *Supercade* and inspiring myriad projects since."


1) 4 SKELETONS (4)
BENJ'S OPTIONS
F)IGHT S)PELL P)ARRY
R)UN U)SE
CHARACTER NAME CLASS AC HITS STATUS
1 FREYA G-FIG -1 78 97
2 NEVE G-MAG 7 258 257
3 RICHARD N-SAM 10 173 258

» [Apple II] *Wizardry* pushed home-computer RPGs forward with party-based gameplay, and spawned seven sequels.

1981

The popularity of shoot-'em-ups showed no sign of fading in 1981, as the genre continued to evolve. *Defender* introduced bi-directional scrolling stages that responded to your movement, *Galaga*'s clever enemies could steal your ships, and the varied sections of *Gorf* and *Vanguard* also made their mark on the genre, as did Atari's *Centipede*. *Tempest* was a highly exciting new concept too, helped by its colour vector graphics and unusual tunnel format. But arcade maze games were the hot new trend in the wake of *Pac-Man*'s success. The likes of *Mouse Trap* and *Lock 'N' Chase* allowed you to reconfigure the maze as a means of defending yourself, while *Crush Roller* added complexity with underpass and overpass sections.

Elsewhere in the world of coin-op games, Sega's *Turbo* raced to the front of the driving pack with detailed graphics and frequently changing scenery. SNK's *Fantasy* allowed players to continue after losing all of their lives, which was useful in allowing everyone to see its diverse range of challenges – for a price, of course. *Qix* tasked players with boxing-out areas of the screen, while *Donkey Kong* was a huge hit for Nintendo.

Atari 2600 owners were mostly happy to buy arcade conversions, and with games like *Asteroids* and *Missile Command* arriving at home that's understandable, but *Warlords* offered a four-player take on *Breakout* that became an instant classic. Activision's first really great games, the bomb-catching *Kaboom!* and the simple but excellent *Ice Hockey*, also hit the market this year. For cheaper home gaming, Grandstand's popular dedicated VFD shoot-'em-up *Astro Wars* was a must have.

On the home computers, it was a great year for RPGs – as well as *Ultima*'s debut, Sir-Tech's *Wizardry* added some graphical sophistication to the genre and would go on to become highly influential in Japan. The arrival of more affordable computers like the Commodore VIC-20 and Sinclair ZX81 brought more systems into homes, with early hits including arcade clones like the *Pac-Man* clone *Jelly Monsters* and a cut back rendition of *Frogger*. However, more original concepts like *3D Defender* and *3D Monster Maze* helped to show the potential of home-grown games. ▶

» [Arcade] It was a fiercely competitive year for shoot-'em-up developers, but Namco's *Galaga* certainly stood out.

MALCOLM EVANS ON EARLY COMPUTING

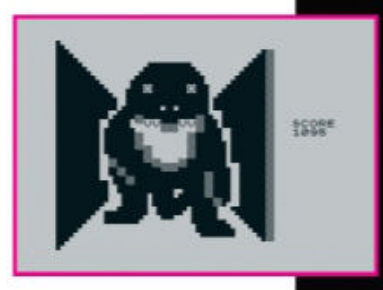
"It was a time for innovation. The ZX81 was born, inviting young minds to play basic games, and, from its manual learn the new language that gave their computer life. We stretched its capabilities to the limit. Even its crude graphics were no restraint to invention.

In bedrooms, ideas bubbled, spawning not only new games but genres of games, inspiring their virgin audience. It was a roller-coaster ride for many young and old boys' ambitions."

3D MONSTER MAZE

DEVELOPER: NEW GENERATION SOFTWARE

Cleverly coded by Malcolm Evans, this ZX81 hit stuck you in a maze with a ferocious T-rex and dared you to make it out in one piece. It proved that even carefully assembled ASCII characters could be scary.



DONKEY KONG

DEVELOPER: NINTENDO R&D1

Shigeru Miyamoto struck gold with *Donkey Kong*, delivering a brilliant platform game that made world-wide stars out of its protagonist and antagonist. It remains a huge hit with high-score players to this day.

ULTIMA

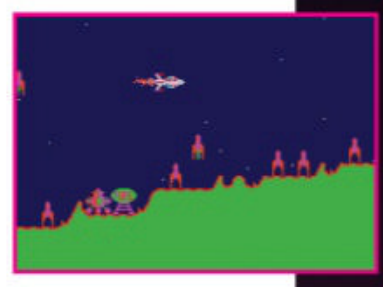
DEVELOPER: ORIGIN SYSTEMS

Richard Garriott's *Ultima* may seem crude by today's standards, but this engaging RPG offered a level of exploration and character development that few other games of the time could match.

SCRAMBLE

DEVELOPER: KONAMI

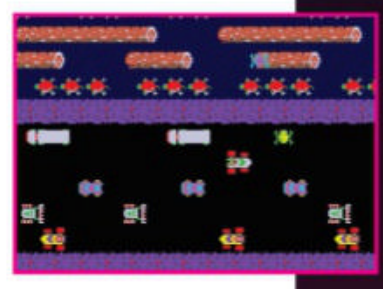
Konami's space shmup is notable for many reasons. It introduces forced-scrolling stages, variation within its continuous levels and requires you to bomb fuel tanks so you can continue your epic quest.



FROGGER

DEVELOPER: KONAMI

We'd argue *Frogger*'s success is due to its simplicity. Its distinctive theme meant it was instantly familiar to anyone, while its frantic nature made it impossible to just play once. It's still hopping around today.



CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN

DEVELOPER: MUSE SOFTWARE

Castle Wolfenstein's World War II setting, clever exploration and subtle stealth elements mesmerised the likes of John Carmack and John Romero. *Doom* certainly wouldn't exist without it.

CENTIPEDE

DEVELOPER: ATARI INC

With countless shooting games set in space, punishing pastel-coloured insects in a garden felt incredibly fresh. Like *Mystery House*, Dona Bailey's game is notable for highlighting early women coders.

UTOPIA

DEVELOPER: MATTEL ELECTRONICS

Don Daglow's inventive strategy gem arguably helped lay the groundwork for real-time strategy games and city-building games like *SimCity*, and proved that console games could offer plenty of depth.

» [Arcade] The cute enemies of *Dig Dug* ended up becoming minor mascots for Namco.

1982

This was the year that third-party publishers really made their mark on the console world, with a glut of games flooding the market. There were some great ones to be found, though – Activision's contributions included Carol Shaw's brilliant shooter *River Raid*, the biplane dodge-'em-up *Barnstorming* and the excellent *Pitfall!*, while Imagic gave us the innovative Intellivision game *Microsurgeon* and the smash hit shooter *Demon Attack*. Parker Brothers didn't have those original concepts, but it had some real licensing might and brought games like *Frogger* and *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* to market.

Not to be outdone, the console manufacturers leaned heavily on licensed games to sell their machines. GCE's newly released Vectrex offered the likes of *Berzerk* and *Scramble*, while the ColecoVision had a great launch on the strength of games like *Zaxxon*, *Turbo* and the pack-in *Donkey Kong*. The underwhelming conversion of *Pac-Man* for the Atari 2600 sold extremely well, but the movie tie-in *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* quickly became notorious for its poor gameplay, saddling it with the infamy of becoming a byword for bad games. *Yars' Revenge* (by *ET*'s Howard Scott Warshaw) was rather better for Atari's machine, eventually becoming its best-selling original 2600 game.

Cute games like *Ms Pac-Man* had well and truly caught on in arcades by this point – *Dig Dug* and *Mr Do!* were very similar games in allowing players to create their own mazes via tunnelling, but *Q*bert* was a totally different experience and managed to stand out thanks to its interesting perspective and swearing main character. In terms of technical innovations, *Zaxxon*'s isometric perspective gave the shoot-'em-up a proper third dimension for the first time.

In the home, *Choplifter!* made its Apple II debut and proved extremely popular, while *The Hobbit* and *Miner 2049er* also found success. In Japan, the enduring box-pushing puzzler *Sokoban* launched for the NEC PC-8801 and would be widely ported and exported through the decade, while Koei's *The Dragon And Princess* was an early example of the Japanese RPG format. Back home we were enjoying the likes of *Mazogs* on the ZX81, but new machines like the Commodore 64 and ZX Spectrum would soon usurp Sir Clive's monochrome marvel.

THE HOBBIT

DEVELOPER: BEAM SOFTWARE

Text adventures had been popular long before *The Hobbit* was conceived, but its solid adaptation of Tolkien's work and its delightful visuals meant many developers soon copied its distinctive style.

PITFALL!

DEVELOPER: Activision

David Crane's inventive platformer was a smash-hit for Activision on the Atari 2600 and one of its best-selling games. Pitfall Harry's adventure formed the blueprints for an entire genre going forward, which isn't bad at all.

POLE POSITION

DEVELOPER: Namco

Racing games certainly weren't uncommon before *Pole Position* hit the arcades, but Namco's fast-paced game pushed the genre in exciting new directions. For many, the arcade racer started here.

ROBOTRON: 2084

DEVELOPER: Vid Kidz

Developers love Eugene Jarvis' twin-stick shooter and it's a favourite Desert Island Disks request. It's not original, but it is an intense adrenaline-fuelled blaster that remains insanely thrilling to play.

FOOTBALL MANAGER

DEVELOPER: Kevin Toms

When *Football Manager* appeared on home computers it set itself apart from its peers by prominently featuring its designer on the box and other advertising, as well as focussing on the management of your team.

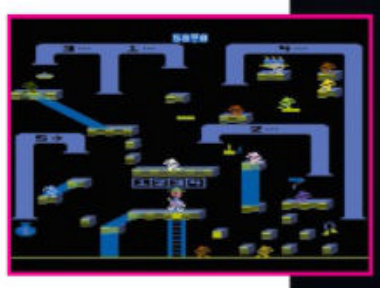
XEVIOUS

DEVELOPER: Namco

Few shmups are as instrumental as Namco's blaster for establishing the vertically scrolling shooter. A rich backstory, interesting combat mechanics and continuously playing music all add to its significance.

MINER 2049ER

DEVELOPER: Big Five Software



Bill Hogue came up with *Miner 2049er* when single-screen platformers were rife. He made his game stand out by using multiple levels and letting you traverse each stage using different methods.

MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR

DEVELOPER: Microsoft

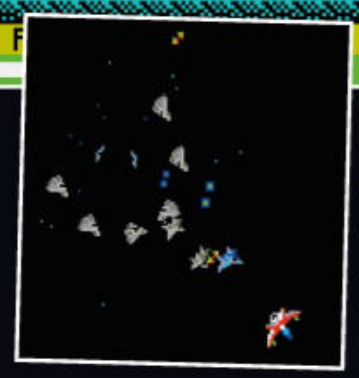
Bruce Artwick built upon his early Apple II flight simulator and added enhanced visuals, weather variables, and much more, reinventing the newly evolving genre in the process.

DAVID CRANE ON ACTIVISION'S IMPACT

"Largely a result of Activision's founding, the Eighties were a great time to be a gamer with an explosion of games. Internally, we were driven to stay ahead of the competition, and we were limited only to our collective imaginations.

For me, *Pitfall!* was the culmination of expansive gameplay on the 2600 – a player could only imagine what he might experience on the next screen. I am proud that people still remember *Pitfall!* with fondness more than 40 years later."

» [ZX Spectrum] Matthew Smith's platformer *Manic Miner* was a truly iconic game from the early Spectrum days.



» [Arcade] After all these years, Konami's arcade blaster *Gyruss* has lost none of its intensity.

1983

While this year is infamous for being the focus of a massive North American market recession that killed many consoles before their time, the cheap home computers that arrived in 1982 meant that things weren't all doom and gloom. The ZX Spectrum provided a home for plenty of new games developed in the UK. Matthew Smith's platformer *Manic Miner* captured the imaginations of many players, Ultimate made a name for itself with *Jetpac* and *Atic Atac*, and *Deathchase* was particularly thrilling. The Commodore 64 became popular internationally and had some superb games too. *Beach Head* allowed players to fight World War II battles on multiple fronts, *Forbidden Forest* gave players an early taste of horror and *International Soccer* was a strong representation of the beautiful game. Compilations like *Cassette 50* started to become popular too.

Big things were going down in Japan's computer scene as well, with plenty of foundational releases such as *Nobunaga's Ambition*, the first of Koei's historical war simulation games. *The Portopia Serial Murder Case* set the stage for Japanese adventure games and visual novels, *Bokosuka Wars* would go on to influence real-time strategy and strategy-RPGs, and the maze favourite *Bomberman* arrived on the MSX.

In North America, publishers like Electronic Arts that embraced the home-computer scene ended up doing well. It released its first games in 1983, including *MULE*, *Pinball Construction Set* and the chess-style strategy game *Archon*, and soon released *One On One: Dr J Vs Larry Bird* – its first foray into the licensed sports game field it would eventually dominate. Doug Smith's frantic gold rush platformer *Lode Runner* gained international acclaim too.

The old guard wasn't completely washed away though – Activision's racer *Enduro* and *The Activision Decathlon* showed that there was still fun to be had with Atari's 2600. The industry decline also hit the arcades, despite the novelty of laserdisc games like *Fire Fox*, *Astron Belt* and of course *Dragon's Lair*. Novel concepts like the bar-room action game *Tapper*, strong blasters like *Gyruss* and *Spy Hunter* and the movie might of *Star Wars* couldn't halt a decline in revenues, but were thoroughly entertaining regardless.

TRIP HAWKINS ON EA'S EARLY DAYS

"The industry's minds were boggled by the originality, quality and scope of our first flight of games. Bill Budge was the linchpin of my idea of software artists, and I loved the creativity and 'learn by doing' themes represented in *Pinball Construction Set*. From the beginning I cared about social gaming and it was very important to me that *Archon* and *MULE* were multiplayer games. But while we knew we had potential, we needed more games on more platforms to grow our revenue so we could survive."

DEFINING GAMES

DRAGON'S LAIR

DEVELOPER: ADVANCED MICROCOMPUTER SYSTEMS

Powered by Laserdisc technology and Don Bluth's lush animation, *Dragon's Lair* delivered a unique arcade experience that would form the basis for QTE scenes in games like *Shenmue*.

STAR WARS

DEVELOPER: ATARI INC

Atari's dramatisation of *Star Wars*' trench run proved that cutting-edge coin-op technology was perfectly capable of replicating the thrills and spills of hit movies and creating smash hits in the process.

JETPAC

DEVELOPER: ULTIMATE PLAY THE GAME

The sheer intensity and pace of Ultimate's first game meant that it almost felt like a lost arcade game, and yet here it was, running on a humble Spectrum. It felt like witchcraft in 1983.

TRACK & FIELD

DEVELOPER: KONAMI

While *The Activision Decathlon* hit first, Konami's own multi-event sports game ended up going the distance thanks to its impressive animation, humorous graphics and finely crafted game mechanics across six fun events.

GRANNY'S GARDEN

DEVELOPER: 4MATION

The introduction of BBC Micros in British schools led to a huge influx in educational software. While American school kids tackled an updated *Oregon Trail*, we navigated this clever adventure.

ANT ATTACK

DEVELOPER: SANDY WHITE

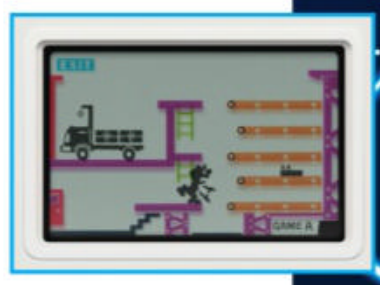
Sandy White's beautifully abstract game brought the exciting isometric worlds of arcades to home computers and let you star as either a male or female protagonist as you navigated the abstract city of Antescher.

MULE

DEVELOPER: OZARK SOFTSCAPE

Electronic Arts' superb strategy game was cleverly designed around four players, featured complex risk vs reward mechanics and neatly encouraged both competition and co-operation in order for players to succeed.

MARIO BROS



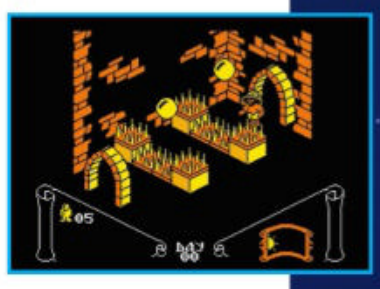
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO

Nintendo's Game & Watch series seemed to be a staple of every playground by 1983. *Mario Bros* is one of the more memorable releases, complete with a lovely clamshell design.

KNIGHT LORE

DEVELOPER: ULTIMATE PLAY THE GAME

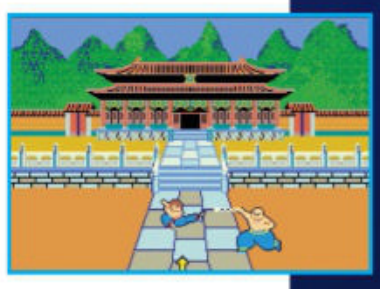
Ultimate's ambitious sequel to *Sabre Wulf* continued the exciting adventures of Sabreman and pushed the visuals and gameplay of isometric games on home computers to the absolute limit.



YIE AR KUNG-FU

DEVELOPER: KONAMI

Konami's one-on-one fighter may have featured similar controls to earlier brawlers, but its use of energy bars, weapon-carrying combatants and female fighters certainly made it stand out from its peers.



ELITE

DEVELOPER: DAVID BRABEN/IAN BELL

Few games highlight the grand designs of home computers like *Elite* does. Choice in David Braben and Ian Bell's game was absolute and its open-ended gameplay felt revolutionary at the time.

THE LORDS OF MIDNIGHT

DEVELOPER: MIKE SINGLETON

Mike Singleton was a clever coder who wouldn't be restrained by the paltry 48K offered by the ZX Spectrum. The result is a masterclass in hybrid game design.

JET SET WILLY

DEVELOPER: SOFTWARE PROJECTS

As ambitious as it was bug-ridden, Matthew Smith's ginormous follow-up to *Manic Miner* cemented him as a rising star and gave excited players a huge (often-copied) mansion to explore.

KUNG-FU MASTER

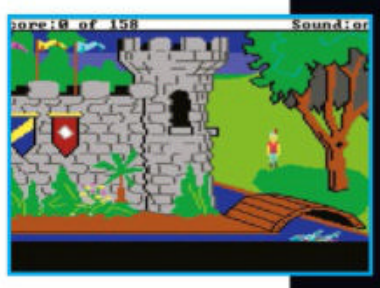
DEVELOPER: IREM

Irem's hard-hitting brawler helped establish the side-scrolling beat-'em-up and saw hero Thomas battling a variety of different bosses and numerous henchmen in his quest to rescue his girlfriend Sylvia.

KING'S QUEST

DEVELOPER: SIERRA ON-LINE

Roberta Williams was once again on hand to help with the next evolutionary leap for graphic adventures, adding animation, depth perspective and other tricks to create an exciting quest like no other.



SKOOL DAZE

DEVELOPER: DAVID REIDY/HELEN REIDY

This excellent game was not only a superb example of how everyday locations could be turned into new gaming experiences, but also offered a hint of sandbox-style gaming. It's also a setting we can all relate to.

» [Atari 8-bit] Everybody really was kung fu fighting in 1984, at least in the world of games.

» [C64] The many rooms of *Impossible Mission* were daunting places for any player to explore.

1984

The proliferation and openness of home computers really bore fruit this year, as developers explored all kinds of delightfully unusual concepts and deep gameplay models. The size of games really opened up with big adventures like *Impossible Mission*, *Elite and Jet Set Willy*, and big stages in games like *Boulder Dash*. Characters like Jeff Minter – who else? – could give us the games with names like *Revenge Of The Mutant Camels* and *Sheep In Space*, which you just wouldn't see on shelves today. We even ended up with actively political games like *Wanted: Monty Mole*, which touched on the controversial miners' strike.

You could even see these new design sensibilities in licensed games like *Ghostbusters*. What could have been a simple action game offered a variety of gameplay elements, from driving to ghost capture and even some financial management. Another trend was a focus on fighting – Jordan Mechner's *Karateka* looked astonishing and *Bruce Lee*, an action-packed game that originated on the Atari 8-bits, soon kicked its way to other formats. Epyx's *Summer Games* also made its debut.

With the American arcade business in a slump, Japanese manufacturers really came to the fore in 1984. Data East, Konami and Irem innovated with *Karate Champ, Yie Ar Kung-Fu* and *Kung-Fu Master* respectively, while Nintendo came out swinging with *Punch-Out!!*. That wasn't all it had to offer as *Duck Hunt* jumped from the Famicom to the arcade too. Capcom made its presence felt with its World War II shooter *1942*, Tehkan's *Bomb Jack* also launched with a bang and Pac-Man found himself in platform action in *Pac-Land*. From the American side of things, Atari Games offered a rare bright moment with the surreal obstacle course *Marble Madness* designed by Mark Cerny.

Though Activision's *HERO* was a worthwhile addition to the Atari 2600 library, console action was largely limited to Japan where Nintendo was building out the Famicom's line-up with games like *Ice Climber* and *Balloon Fight*. In the Japanese home-computer scene, RPGs continued to gain popularity as Falcom's *Dragon Slayer* helped to codify action RPGs and *Hydlide* added to it soon after. But the most addictive computer game of the year originated in the Soviet Union – Alexey Pajitnov's *Tetris*.

CHRIS WILD ON THE HOME COMPUTER REVOLUTION

"I don't think I owned my own Spectrum in 1984, but I was definitely using my brother's, hooked on playing *The Lords Of Midnight*, and anything by my idols the Stampers at Ultimate. When you look at the games released in that year, you can see the quick advancement of quality and technique as developers felt their way around the edges of what the Spectrum could achieve; quickly iterating code, design, and art, creating new genres and moving the only slightly older ones forward."

» [Arcade] *Gradius* – or *Nemesis*, if you prefer – would become an iconic entry in the shoot-'em-up canon.

1985

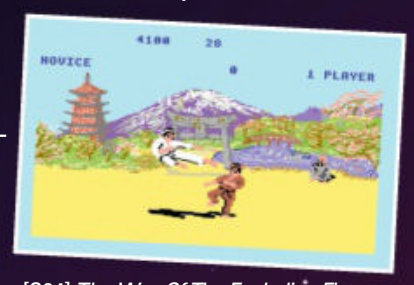
If there's one thing that people love, it's a bit of novelty, and this turned out to be an excellent way to get people back into arcades. *Hang-On* gave players a full-body experience with a massive motorbike that had to be tilted for control, straddling the line between videogame and fairground ride. The racer's success inspired plenty of similar games from many companies through the rest of the decade, including Sega's own *Space Harrier* later in the year.

Regular old games weren't done though, as a number of genres were taken to new heights this year – or new heights of difficulty in the case of platform games, as *Ghosts 'N Goblins* was tougher than a two-dollar steak. *Gradius* offered a novel power-up system and some fascinating shoot-'em-up stage design, while *TwinBee* swapped military and space themes for something altogether cuter. Konami didn't just have those up its sleeves, as *Green Beret* was to sideways scrolling run-and-guns what *Commando* was to overhead ones.

Back on home computers, *Rescue On Fractalus* drew praise for its smooth flight, as well as the unexpectedly terrifying moments when downed friendly pilots aren't friendly at all. *The Way Of The Exploding Fist* set a new standard for one-on-one fighting games in the home with its varied moves, *Paradroid*'s robot-capturing captivated C64 owners and *The Bard's Tale* let players explore the town of Skara Brae.

Julian Gollop also came to prominence with *Chaos: The Battle Of Wizards*, a superb game of tactics based on his earlier tabletop game design. Mastertronic's *Finders Keepers* proved that budget games could be worth your time, while hit compilations like *They Sold A Million* and *Soft Aid* offered value by bundling established favourites together, though arcade conversions like *Commando* ultimately dominated sales. 1985 was also the year 16-bit systems like the Atari ST and Amiga debuted.

Over in the USA, Nintendo convinced New York retailers to stock its test launch of the NES – a machine that would surely sell on the strength of the toy robot ROB and games like *Gyromite*, since regular home videogames were clearly a faded fad. *Super Mario Bros* would ultimately prove that theory slightly wrong.



» [C64] *The Way Of The Exploding Fist* was the UK's best-selling game of the year.

EUGENE JARVIS ON REJUVENATING ARCADES

"How do you fight *Super Mario* with the same old generic button and joystick platformer? The answer is you don't. You go for more immersion with custom-input controllers like *Hang-On*'s or *Paperboy*'s handlebar/throttles. Then pump up the output action with motion actuators, bigger and higher-res screens, and bass-pumping sound systems. For players of the era this new, more immersive experience was pure crack, and you couldn't get it at home. The same thing still works in 2023's arcades!"

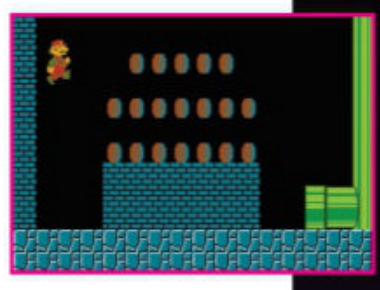
SPACE HARRIER

DEVELOPER: SEGA AM2

■ Yu Suzuki's outrageously fast follow-up to his *Hang-On* games pushed Sega's super-scaler technology to its limits and offered a mesmerising blaster that elevated hydraulic arcade design to new levels.

SUPER MARIO BROS

DEVELOPER: NINTENDO R&D4



■ If *Pitfall!* started the platformer template, then *Super Mario Bros* easily perfected it. It was a truly terrific calling card for the Famicom/NES and helped turn Mario into a global superstar.

GAUNTLET

DEVELOPER: ATARI GAMES

■ Deviously designed to empty your wallet as quickly as possible, Ed Logg's supercharged take on *Dandy* featured four-player action, dangerous mazes, deadly monsters and insane amounts of speech.

MERCENARY

DEVELOPER: NOVAGEN SOFTWARE

■ While it shares traits with *Elite*, Novagen's *Mercenary* is very much its own game, creating a seemingly living, breathing world of treachery and intrigue that few other games of the time could emulate.

PAPERBOY

DEVELOPER: ATARI GAMES

■ With its bespoke bike handlebar controllers and instantly recognisable theme, Atari's *Paperboy* proved that a neat concept and interesting controls could turn even delivering papers into a world-wide hit.

COMMANDO

DEVELOPER: CAPCOM

■ Thematically rich and featuring a human protagonist, Capcom's fast-paced vertically scrolling blaster received a slew of copycat imitators but still managed to dominate both the arcade and home-computer charts.

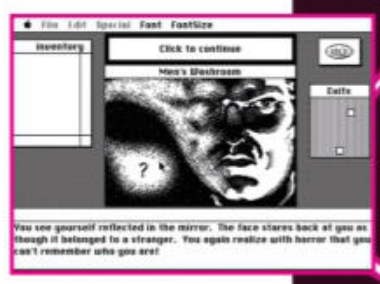
LITTLE COMPUTER PEOPLE

DEVELOPER: ACTIVISION

■ Social simulation games are huge today, but the likes of *The Sims* can be traced back to this charming effort where you acted as a custodian for a cute on-screen character.

DÉJÁ VU

DEVELOPER: ICOM SIMULATIONS



■ This early point-and-click adventure casts you as a private eye with a wonky memory. It's notable for its strong story, focus on lateral thinking and how it tackles memory degradation.

» [NES] *Castlevania* also continued the low-level trend for spooky games that was beginning to emerge.

» [Arcade] Wonder Boy's skateboarding helped him stand out from the platform crowd.

1986

This was a year in which the Japanese consoles really delivered the goods. Konami moved its *Goemon* series from arcade to Famicom this year and Enix's *Dragon Quest* set the template for Japanese RPGs of the future, but Nintendo's focus was on the Famicom Disk System, with *The Legend Of Zelda* serving as the add-on's flagship title. Later in the year, it offered platform games with increasingly elaborate structures. *Metroid*'s innovations are inescapable, and *Castlevania*'s accomplished horror action is famed for good reason. Not to be outdone, the Master System offered *Alex Kidd In Miracle World*, which added variety with shops and vehicles, as well as its unique rock-paper-scissors boss battles.

Platform games also had a good year in the arcade – as well as *Bubble Bobble*, *Wonder Boy* brightened up arcades while Namco's *Rolling Thunder* set a template for platform run-and-guns that would be copied in the future. Plenty of other games were set apart by interesting technical gimmicks, including the spinning cabinet of *WEC Le Mans 24*, the ultra-wide display of Taito's shmup *Darius* and the rotary joystick used to aim shots in SNK's *Ikari Warriors*.

Without such hardware trickery to rely on, home-computer games had to be conceptually inventive. *Alter Ego* was a thought-provoking social simulation in which your choice determined the outcome of your life, while the unusual puzzle gameplay of *The Sentinel* attracted much acclaim for Geoff Crammond. *Quazatron* brilliantly adapted *Paradroid* to the Spectrum's strengths, and *Spindizzy* provided more isometric excitement. *Jack The Nipper*'s encouragement of infant disobedience was also fantastic, and we're surprised the concept hasn't resurfaced in modern times.

There was room for more conventional concepts, too. *Leaderboard* was the best simulation of golf to date, *Shanghai* offered many thousands of players the chance to enjoy some mahjong solitaire, and *Cobra* turned a mediocre Sylvester Stallone film into a highly entertaining run-and-gun. *Defender Of The Crown*'s strategy gameplay was captivating, but it also highlighted the power of the Amiga with some extraordinary graphics – the 16-bit machines may have arrived in 1985, but the revolution was truly upon us all now.

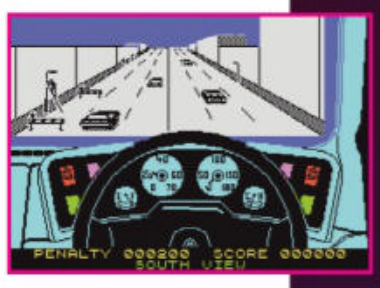
PAUL OWENS ON ARCADE CONVERSIONS

"There were several attractions to arcade conversions with the primary being that the players will know the game from the arcade. We were able to install the arcade version in the office and given that for 8-bit, we would be unable to convert the whole game (lack of memory/time), having the game to play made it easier for the best elements to be cherry-picked. Graphics conversion to 8-bit was always an issue, but often we had the arcade supplier's help and were able to download the original graphics from the board."

TURBO ESPRIT

DEVELOPER: DURRELL SOFTWARE

Best described as a prototype *Grand Theft Auto*, Durrell Software's free-roaming driving game gave you four huge cities to explore and plenty of criminals to bust in whatever way you wanted.



OUT RUN

DEVELOPER: SEGA AM2

A trip across Europe inspired Yu Suzuki's game and proved that racing against the clock to toe-tapping tunes in beautiful locations could be just as exhilarating as racing other vehicles.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

DEVELOPER: NINTENDO R&D4

Crafted from Shigeru Miyamoto's love of exploration, Link's first Famicom/NES adventure would not only influence later games in the series but also arguably help inspire later action RPGs as well.

STARFLIGHT

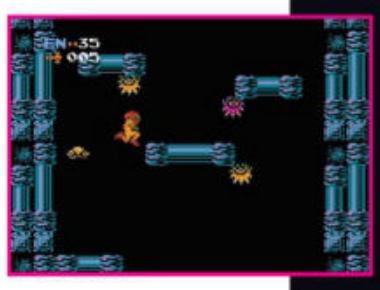
DEVELOPER: BINARY SYSTEMS

Binary Systems' epic space game merged one-on-one shooting with thoughtful resource gathering and diplomacy and a rich lore of fascinating alien cultures to create absorbing sandbox-style gameplay.

METROID

DEVELOPER: NINTENDO R&D1

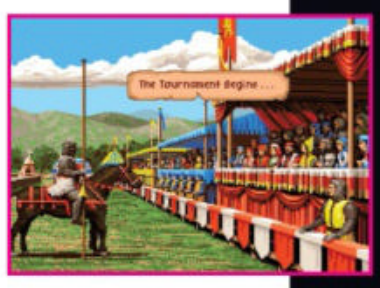
While *The Sacred Armour Of Antiriad* featured similar game mechanics and a focus on gated exploration, Nintendo's game became the benchmark that all similar games would be judged against.



DEFENDER OF THE CROWN

DEVELOPER: CINEMAWARE

It also came out on the 8-bit computers, but Cinemaware's game was instrumental in highlighting the power of 16-bit systems, thanks to its cinema-like presentation.



BUBBLE BOBBLE

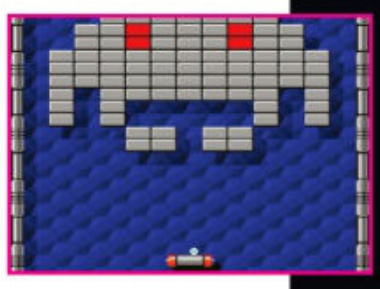
DEVELOPER: TAITO

Cute games weren't rare before *Bubble Bobble*, but rarely were they this fun and charming. A stunning two-player mode, a bouncy tune and myriad secrets made it a hit, and led to its 1987 sequel *Rainbow Islands*.

ARKANOID

DEVELOPER: TAITO

Thanks to eye-catching wall designs, annoying enemies and varied power-ups, Taito's *Arkanoid* revitalised a genre that had died off with *Super Breakout* and spawned countless copycat clones in its wake.



» [C64] *The Last Ninja* was a big hit thanks to its great looks and sharp gameplay.

» [Arcade] Running and gunning through side-scrolling stages wasn't all you could do in Konami's *Contra*.

1987

Much of the hardware on the market was mature by 1987, meaning that for the most part the dominant theme of the year was making the most of that hardware – and this yielded some brilliant results. *The Last Ninja* was at once beautiful and expansive, *Driller* offered proper 3D in the home and Archer Maclean managed to squeeze a third combatant into *IK+*. Extreme sports also hit the scene, with titles like *Skate Or Die* and *California Games*, while budget releases like *Feud* and *Dizzy* continued to thrive.

The same went for the NES, already four years old on a technical level but just arriving on UK shores. Nintendo's machine benefitted from the star power of *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!*, as well as the first entry in Capcom's long-running *Mega Man* series. In Japan, *Final Fantasy* arrived and carried on the RPG boom that *Dragon Quest* had inspired. The Master System was a little fresher, and alongside conversions such as *Out Run* and *After Burner*, offered players the *Metroid*-esque platform adventure *Zillion* and the brilliant science fiction-themed RPG *Phantasy Star*.

Arcade developers had to get inventive too. Konami spiced up *Contra*'s co-op running and gunning with perspective changes, while Atari Games added combat to the racing formula to create *RoadBlasters*. Capcom allowed you to feel the action of *Street Fighter* with its pressure-sensitive buttons, and Namco allowed operators to link its twin sit-down *Final Lap* cabinets for enormous eight-player races. Taking an alternative path, Sega just decided to do '*Rolling Thunder* but with ninjas' and struck gold with *Shinobi*, a less-flashy companion to games like *After Burner* and *Thunder Blade*.

It was a vintage year in the world of adventure games, with the excellent point-and-click *Maniac Mansion* joined by the likes of the lascivious *Leisure Suit Larry*, the law-abiding *Police Quest*, *Space Quest II* and *Shadowgate*. These games were typically the preserve of 16-bit computer owners, who would also have likely been enjoying the rather tasty first-person *Dungeon Master* if they happened to be Atari ST owners. The future was 16-bit, and it was approaching fast.

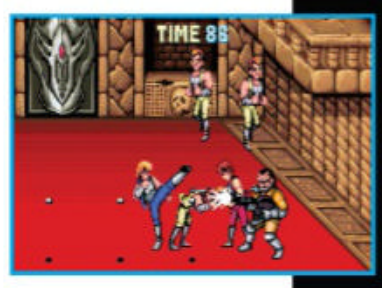
PHILIP OLIVER ON BUDGET GAMES

"Creating budget games in 1987 was fun for us as we'd developed a really slick development pipeline and had mastered making games on Amstrad and Spectrum. We'd challenged ourselves to make each game in a month, by taking code from previous games and reworking them to present the players with something new and original. *Dizzy* was developed from *Ghost Hunters* (written a few months before and our first Spectrum game), by adding puzzles inspired by our love of playing text adventures and setting it in a cartoon fantasy world."

RUNNING GAMES

DOUBLE DRAGON

DEVELOPER: TECHNOS JAPAN



Yoshihisa Kishimoto's game built on his earlier *Kunio-kun* brawlers and redefined the side-scrolling beat-'em-up thanks to its dynamic combat, assorted weaponry, two-player action and urbanised scrolling stages.

R-TYPE

DEVELOPER: IREM

Famed for its memorable charge shot, iconic bosses, high difficulty factor and distinctive biomechanical aesthetic, Irem's game took the shmup genre in exciting new directions and spawned countless imitators.

BARBARIAN

DEVELOPER: PALACE SOFTWARE

Many will remember *that* cover, but it's the exciting sword-based gameplay and brutal decapitations that helped *Barbarian* prove that home-computer fighting games could be every bit as good as their arcade counterparts.

DUNGEON MASTER

DEVELOPER: FTL GAMES

FTL Games' dungeon crawler created a fertile formula for others to copy thanks to its exciting real-time combat, gruesome monsters, clever dungeon design and the ability to manipulate the environment.

HEAD OVER HEELS

DEVELOPER: JON RITMAN

Fuelled by Bernie Drummond's surreal visuals, two unique playable characters and some exceptionally crafted puzzles, Jon Ritman's game proved isometric adventures still had exciting new avenues to explore.

MANIAC MANSION

DEVELOPER: LUCASFILM GAMES

While it wasn't the first point-and-click adventure, few of its peers have been as genre-pushing as *Maniac Mansion*. It also highlighted that games could be funny while they were crafting great stories.

PHANTASY STAR

DEVELOPER: SEGA R&D2

As other RPGs became mired in fantasy tropes, Sega's game reached for the stars and offered exciting new worlds to explore that were filled with engaging characters and fearsome monsters.

OPERATION WOLF

DEVELOPER: TAITO

Taito's gung-ho lightgun game may have riffed off the films of Schwarzenegger but allowed you to revel in a far higher body count than Arnie ever managed on the screen, all while wielding a replica Uzi.

ROBOCOP

DEVELOPER: OCEAN SOFTWARE

Platoon may have formed the basis of Ocean's multi-gameplay approach to film adaptations, but *RoboCop* perfected it, delivering a smash hit that many later film adaptations would attempt to copy.

JOHN MADDEN FOOTBALL

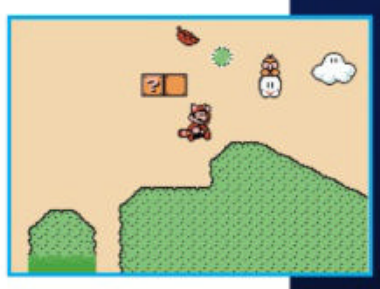
DEVELOPER: ELECTRONIC ARTS

While it lacked official licences, EA's game featured virtually every other aspect of the popular sport and would lay the foundations for countless sequels to come.

SUPER MARIO BROS 3

DEVELOPER: NINTENDO R&D4

Mario's third NES adventure proved another monumental shift in what gamers expected from a platform game. It also highlighted that Nintendo was becoming pretty much untouchable within the genre.



DRAGON QUEST III

DEVELOPER: CHUNSOFT

Though it's notable for its flexible character classes, this hit RPG is best remembered in Japan for being so highly anticipated that hundreds of children bunked off school so they could buy it.

CHASE HQ

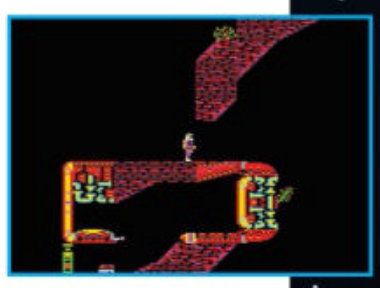
DEVELOPER: TAITO

Although Taito's high-speed racer did give you a tight time limit to contend with, it was more concerned with having you aggressively take down fleeing felons as quickly as possible.

EXILE

DEVELOPER: PETER IRVIN/JEREMY SMITH

While it's perhaps best-known for its *Metroid*-like structure and hard-to-get-used-to gravity, *Exile*'s greatest achievement is in building a unique living world that felt far beyond what similar games were offering.



WASTELAND

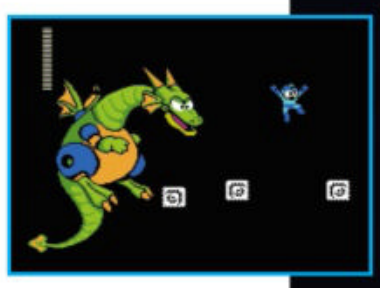
DEVELOPER: INTERPLAY PRODUCTIONS

Featuring gameplay based on popular tabletop mechanics of the time, *Wasteland*'s apocalyptic setting, engaging writing and willful NPCs helped influence countless later games, including a series called *Fallout*.

MEGA MAN II

DEVELOPER: CAPCOM

Capcom's sequel is a vastly improved follow-up, adding challenging level layouts, terrific boss designs and memorable weapons. Little wonder it went on to become the most successful game of the series.



» [PC Engine] Good: new console. Bad: brains and guts in a pinball game? That's just nasty.

» [Arcade] Wallop the things, watch them splat against the wall. That's kind of gross too.

1988

The moral authorities were sure to be out in force when they saw the kinds of games that started showing up in arcades in 1988. Namco's *Splatterhouse* was a beat-'em-up love letter to the gory horror films that were so popular during the decade, while *NARC* went for the over-the-top action-movie route, justifying its bloodshed by casting the enemies as drug traffickers. Of course, the real thing wasn't too far away as *RoboCop* was a hit in both the arcades and the home for Data East and Ocean Software.

Even on the home computers, it was hard to avoid these themes – gore was also a key feature of the cult cyberpunk adventure *Snatcher*, the Japanese game that was arguably Hideo Kojima's most famous work of the decade. Back here in the UK, if you weren't working through Ocean's excellent *Platoon*, you might well have been taking out street thugs in *Target: Renegade*. Fortunately, *MicroProse Soccer* steered clear of any violence on the terraces and delivered a sensible take on football, though *Speedball* ensured that violence and sport retained their long-standing connection.

Nintendo's stance on violence ensured that the NES version of *Ninja Gaiden* didn't have anything gory going on, instead providing good clean platform fun that contrasted with the beat-'em-up action of the arcade game (called *Shadow Warriors*). Meanwhile, blasters like *Armalyte* and the Master System's *Power Strike* kept the screaming deaths on a more theoretical level, which will have been a relief to concerned parents everywhere.

1988 was also the year that import games became attractive to the UK audience, as news of new super consoles from Japan arrived in magazines. The diminutive PC Engine offered up conversions of *R-Type* and *Space Harrier*, as well as the creepy pinball game *Alien Crush* and the platformer *The Legendary Axe*, all of which were as good as the screenshots made you imagine they might be. Late in the year, Sega would launch the Mega Drive with a sequel to *Space Harrier*, which at the very least looked great on paper.

TONY TAKOUSHI ON IMPORT GAMES

"With the arrival of the Sega Master System and the 8-bit consoles I was hungry for more… so looked to Japanese mags and saw there was another world of machines and games out there! This was an absolute *thrill* to me at the time, so I devoured the mags and made calls to find out more. The response in *CVG* was amazing and the editor asked me to expand it to two pages and I went hunting for more 'gold' – the results spoke for themselves, as the Mean Machines section exploded in popularity."

» [Arcade] Burly brawls were the flavour of the year in the coin-op world, and rightly so.

» [Atari Lynx] *Blue Lightning* was an impressive display of the graphical prowess of Atari's new handheld hardware.

1989

If you were a fan of beat-'em-ups, arcades at the end of the Eighties were the place to be. Whether you favoured *Golden Axe*'s fantasy theme and spectacular magic attacks, the four-player cartoon action of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* or the more traditional urban combat of *Final Fight*, there was something for everyone. Elsewhere in the arcades, *Strider*'s acrobatic action and the driving games *Super Monaco GP* and *Hard Drivin'* turned heads.

Strategy games including *North & South*, *SimCity* and *Populous* were in vogue on the home computers, as were shoot-'em-ups like *Battle Squadron* and *Xenon 2: Megablast*. It was a good year for point-and-click adventures like *Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade* and *The Colonel's Bequest* too. Meanwhile, games like *Shadow Of The Beast* and *It Came From The Desert* really took advantage of the Amiga hardware, but games like *Myth: History In The Making* and *Stunt Car Racer* were great across all formats. The brilliant *Prince Of Persia* also landed this year, but only on the Apple II – other platforms had to wait.

If you were following the import game scene, you got an early glimpse of technologies that would carry us into the Nineties. Handheld games came of age this year thanks to new hardware launches, with the Atari Lynx boasting the impressive air combat game *Blue Lightning* and a great conversion of *California Games*. Nintendo's Game Boy had a range of great early games too, including *Pinball: Revenge Of The Gator*, *The Final Fantasy Legend*, the iconic *Super Mario Land* and its pack-in game *Tetris*.

Super Hang-On, *Truxton* and *Golden Axe* were the kind of arcade conversions that convinced many to import Sega's 16-bit Mega Drive, and the PC Engine offered plenty of great games of its own, including *Bonk's Adventure*, *Military Madness* and the action RPG *Neutopia*. However, the HuCard games took a back seat to CD-ROM games this year. An accurate conversion of *Wonder Boy III: Monster Lair* and particularly the RPG *Ys Book I & II* really shined – with fantastic cutscenes, plenty of voice acting and amazing music, it offered a tantalising glimpse of what the technology could offer us in the coming decade. That's a story for another time though… ✱

JIM BAGLEY ON THE GAME BOY

"I think the Game Boy was so popular because the batteries lasted for a lot longer than the competition, the Game Gear and especially longer than the Lynx. Also the game that came with it, *Tetris*, was such an addictively playable game, and from a developer's point of view it was a nice system – it was like a monochrome Speccy but with hardware sprites. I wrote *Defender* for the Game Boy, which is a fast-scrolling game which made the screen really blurry, but it was a nice console to program for."

DEFINING GAMES

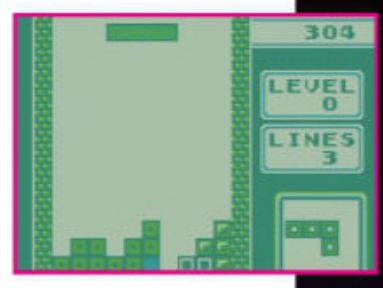
POPULOUS

DEVELOPER: BULLFROG PRODUCTIONS

Bullfrog's inventive strategy game allowed you to play god and helped spawn a brand-new genre in the process. Whether you're using manipulation or divine intervention, leading your followers to victory is always satisfying.

TETRIS

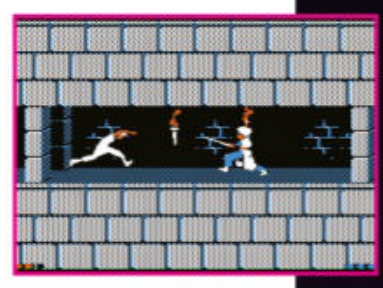
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO R&D1



Granted, *Tetris* had existed long before its Game Boy iteration came along, but it was that multi-million-selling version that arguably turned Alexey Pajitnov's classic puzzler into a household name.

PRINCE OF PERSIA

DEVELOPER: JORDAN MECHNER



Building on what he learned from *Karateka*, Jordan Mechner's follow-up fused cinematic storytelling with intense platform action and derring-do swordfighting, all finished off with some impossibly slick rotoscoped animation.

FANTASY WORLD DIZZY

DEVELOPER: THE OLIVER TWINS

Budget games were absolutely huge during the late-Eighties and no budget hero was bigger than Dizzy. Created by the Oliver twins, Dizzy's third adventure remains his best and proved that big games didn't need big price tags.

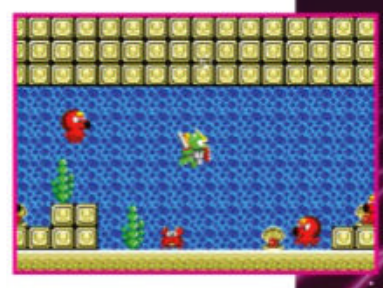
HARD DRIVIN'

DEVELOPER: ATARI GAMES

Namco's *Winning Run* may have pushed polygons in arcade racers first, but Atari's seminal game let you tackle jumps and stunt loops while offering a convincing physics engine and a realistic car shell.

WONDER BOY III: THE DRAGON'S TRAP

DEVELOPER: WESTONE



While *Metroid*-like in its structure, its reliance on switching animal forms to continue progress certainly helped Westone's enjoyable game forge its own unique path.

THE REVENGE OF SHINOBI

DEVELOPER: SEGA R&D2

Home computers still dominated in the late-Eighties, but Sega's sequel, with its arcade-like visuals and epic boss fights was an appealing showpiece for the new console generation.

SIMCITY

DEVELOPER: MAXIS

Will Wright's epic city-builder helped revolutionise the genre and received huge acclaim. Its structure meant that it stood apart from other strategy games and led Maxis to create all manner of *Sim* follow-ups.

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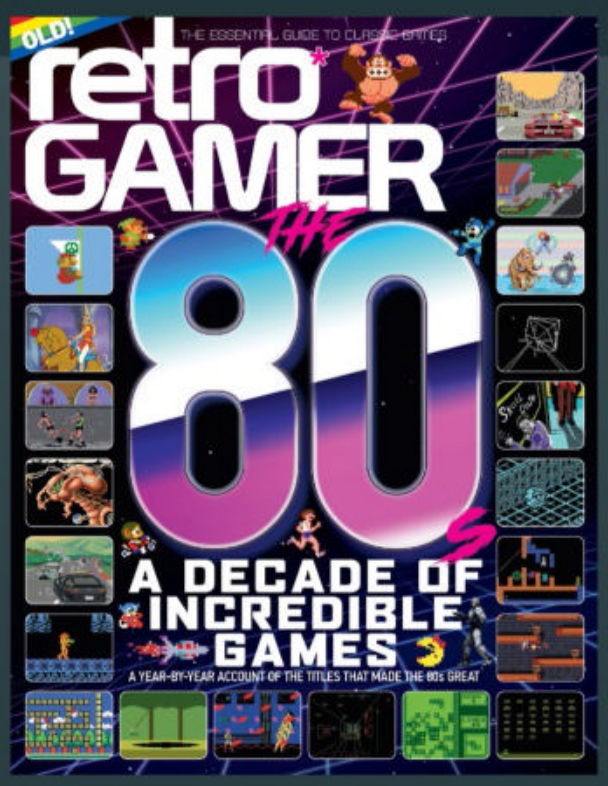
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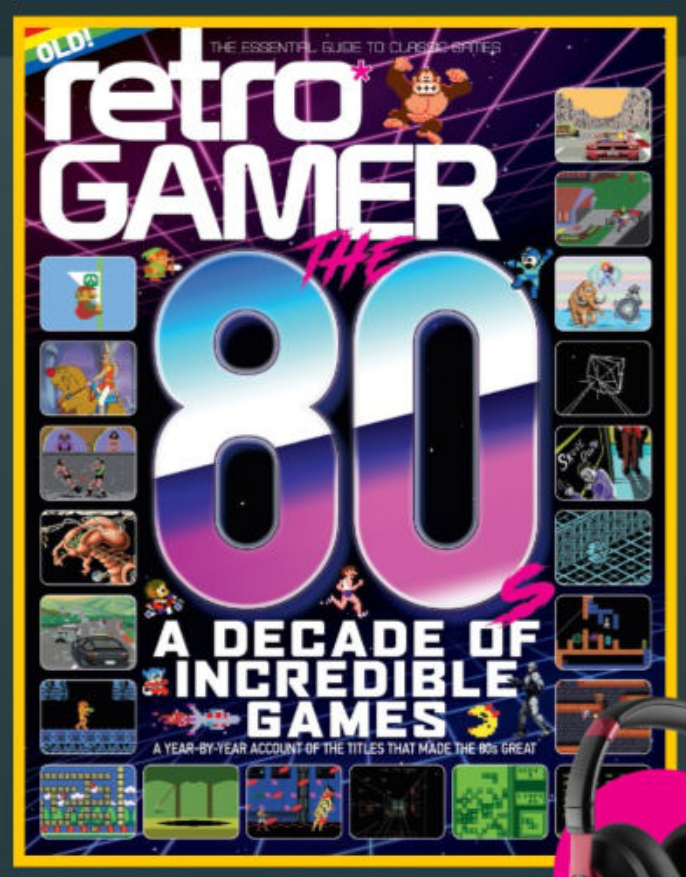
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ULTIMATE GUIDE

THE WAY OF THE EXPLODING FIST

ALTHOUGH FAR FROM THE FIRST BEAT-'EM-UP ON HOME COMPUTERS, THE WAY OF THE EXPLODING FIST WAS THE EARLIEST TO FEATURE MULTIPLE MOVES. LET RETRO GAMER TEACH YOU THE WAYS OF GREGG BARNETT'S SEMINAL FIGHTING GAME

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

In 1984, Alfred Milgrom, the cofounder of Australian developer Beam Software, admitted to *Your Computer* magazine that his firm had a problem. Although its latest adventure games were the envy of its rivals, those competitors' action games were technically far superior to Beam's. But the solution to Alfred's dilemma was already within his grasp, in that his C64 conversion specialist Gregg Barnett was keen to do something more original. Which makes sense, given that Gregg's creative drive almost led to him making movies. While studying computer science at Melbourne University in 1983, Gregg had applied to the Australian Film And Television School. The school was a big deal in Australia at the time. Mel Gibson had gone there, as had many other famous Australian actors and directors. But the advice that Gregg received from the revered educational institute was to reapply after he had gotten some real-world experience.

Home computers were starting to make an impact at this point, and so Gregg bought an Atari 400, then soon after he became aware of Beam Software. Beam distributed the Scott Adams Adventure International text adventures in Australia, and he went to its offices on occasion to buy some of them. The firm had an unusual set up, in so much as it was based in Melbourne, but its founders also owned a publisher in London called Melbourne House.

At the time, there were hardly any other games development companies in Australia, and so Beam had its pick of the best home-grown talent. So when it advertised for a programmer Gregg naturally applied. He took some demos he had written on his Atari 400 to his interview, and a suitably impressed Beam gave him the job.

Gregg's first task was to work on BASIC type-in books for the VIC-20 and the C64, and he later ported *Hungry Horace* from the

TOP TACTICS

HOW TO GET FROM NOVICE TO TENTH DAN IN EXPLODING FIST

SMOOTH MOVES

You can't just walk up to your enemy and hit them in *Exploding Fist* – it's not a pub fight, after all! You have to be correctly positioned and pull off your move at just the right time. A string of rapid, contrasting moves is often the best way to catch your opponent off-guard.

BLOCKING CHOPS

They say the best defence is a good offence, but in *Exploding Fist* the opposite can be true. Blocking opponents' attacks can be preferable to backing off out of reach, as it puts you in the perfect position for a counter-attack instead of too far away to connect with them.

CALL MY BLUFF

Performing moves in *Exploding Fist* isn't instant; you can give up on them partway through. As well as doing this when you change your mind, you can also start then stop attacks in order to con your opponent into not preparing for the move you're actually going to pull off.

COUNTDOWN CAPERS

Points are given for hitting your rival in *Exploding Fist*: half points for soft blows and full points for hard knocks. You usually need two full points to progress, but there is a work around. If you stay ahead on points, and run down the clock, you're declared the winner.

TOTAL BULL!

It's short and sweet, but *Exploding Fist*'s bonus stage is a cracker. After beating your opposite number on the game's Buddha level, a raging bull charges towards you. It's a tricky feat to get right, but with perfect timing you can knock the beast over with a single punch.

» [C64] Before each of *Exploding Fist*'s bouts the combatants bow before each other.

» [C64] As you work up through the dans in *Exploding Fist* the AI opponents get harder to hit.

"I HAD TO ASSEMBLE IT, GENERATE THE HEX, AND THEN LEAVE THE PRINTOUTS FOR MY MUM TO TYPE IN"
RICHARD COSTELLO

Spectrum to the C64. He next co-developed *Horace Goes Skiing* with William Tang and Alfred, coding the C64 version as William programmed its Spectrum counterpart. He then adapted the popular Spectrum text adventures *The Hobbit* and *Sherlock* to the C64.

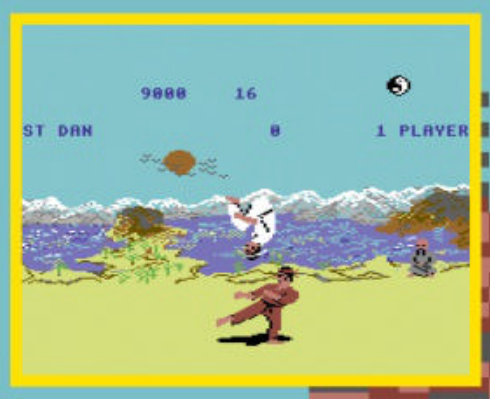
One area where Gregg felt out of his depth was producing the graphics for these projects, and so he convinced Beam's management to hire artists. Prior to this, the firm's programmers or Alfred had created the visuals for its games themselves. But following Gregg's petition, college graduates were taken on in art roles and taught to use the company's own graphics package Melbourne Draw.

CONVERSION CAPERS

WHICH VERSION OF EXPLODING FIST BEATS WHICH?

C64

A lively title tune introduces the C64 original, which then makes way for more subtle in-game music. Its skilfully animated fighters are nicely defined, and its four backdrops are beautifully rendered. Its hit detection is perfect, and it even has a bullfight bonus stage!



ZX SPECTRUM

Its music is limited to beepy pre-bout jingles and it lacks the C64's sampled battle cries. It also has monochrome combatants and less colourful backgrounds. But the Spectrum *Exploding Fist* plays well, and has all four of the original's backdrops. There's no bull, though.

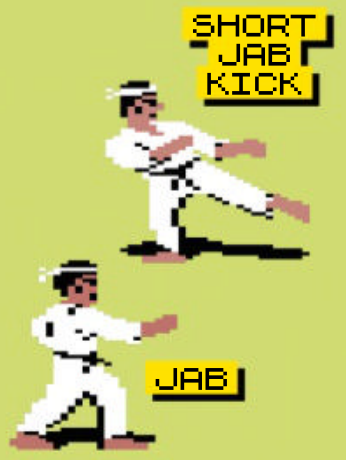
AMSTRAD CPC

As it uses the Amstrad's 16-colour mode, the CPC *Exploding Fist* is as vibrant as the original, and it plays identically, apart for its lack of bull. Its second fighter has purple instead of red robes, and its one background is unique, but its music and sounds are minimal.

BBC MICRO

As well as a playful in-game tune, the BBC Micro *Exploding Fist* has crunching sound effects. Its fighters wear blue and black, but they're just as nicely animated and depicted as the original's. The gameplay is all there, minus the bull, but there are only two backdrops.

» [C64] Half the fun of *Exploding Fist* is the satisfaction of brutally taking down your rival.



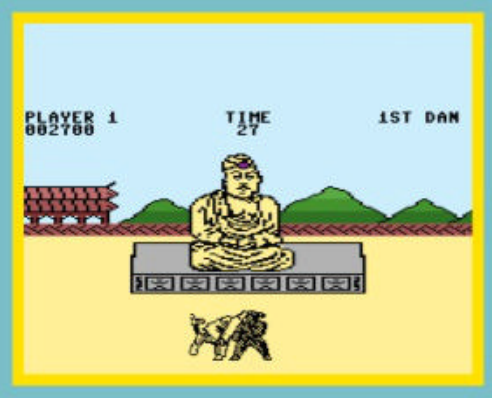
Having proven his worth with his C64 conversions, Gregg was given permission to develop an original project of his own. What he had in mind was a martial-arts fighting game. He was aware that home-computer fighting games already existed, but most limited the player to one or two moves. By comparison, his plan was to create the first beat-'em-up for home computers with multiple moves. Something that had previously only been done in the arcades.

BBC ELECTRON

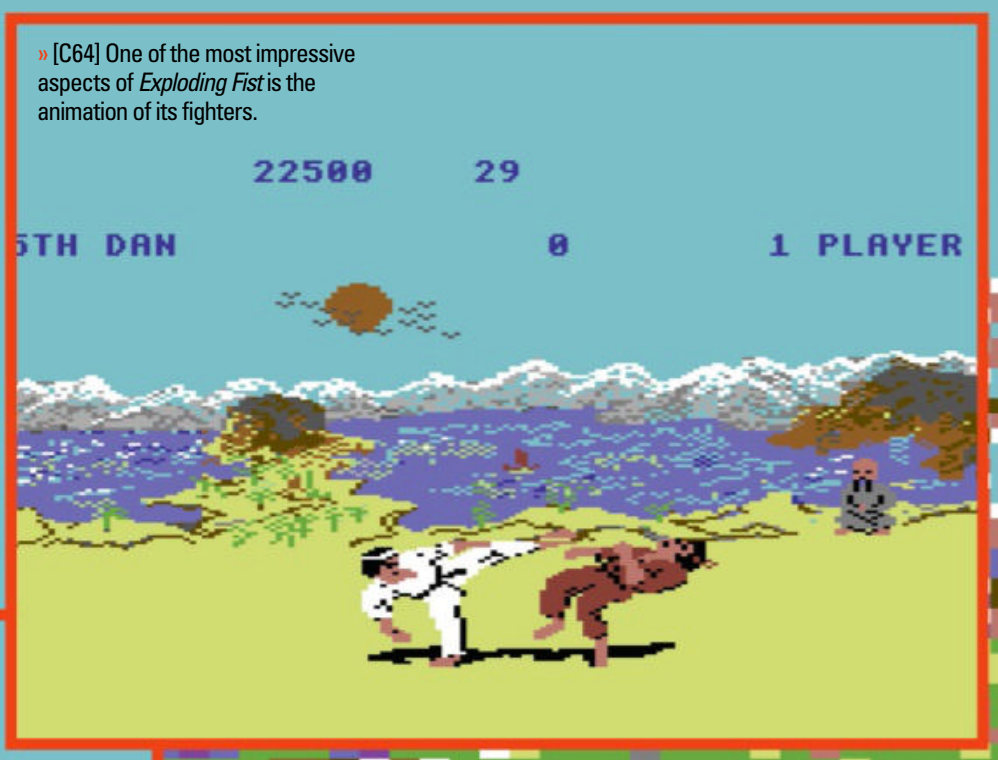
Essentially a paired back version of the BBC game, the Electron *Exploding Fist* has slightly flickery animation, single-channel in-game music, no sound effects and just one location. Otherwise it's an accurate port. It plays just like the C64 original, although it's slower.

C16/PLUS 4

Squeezing *Exploding Fist* into the C16's 16K of memory was always going to require concessions. So the combatants are smaller than the original's, there's only one background and the music is single-channel, but to its designer's credit the gameplay is just as compelling.



"I REMEMBER BEING QUITE IMPRESSED WITH WHAT THE ARTIST MANAGED TO DO GIVEN THAT HE ONLY HAD MONOCHROME TO WORK WITH"
RICHARD COSTELLO



» [C64] One of the most impressive aspects of *Exploding Fist* is the animation of its fighters.

» [C64] *Exploding Fist* isn't all about attacking, you have to block your opponent's moves as well.

Although Beam was located in Australia, its London publishing arm Melbourne House was as much part of the British games industry as any UK software house. The computer-games scene in Britain was shaped by the magazines that reviewed the latest releases, and they often emphasised technical advances that gave titles previously unseen features such as super-fast scrolling or multitudes of sprites. Gregg planned to tap into this focus on tech-based progress by giving his game pixel-perfect hit detection and silky-smooth animation.

In terms of his project's gameplay, Gregg was influenced by the Technos coin-op *Karate Champ*. He even told Alfred that he thought it was the only arcade game that would be ideal as a home-computer game. He disregarded its cartoony style and staid presentation, however, and focussed on replicating its combat. Although he based the specific moves in his title on a fighting style conceived by Bruce Lee called Jeet Kune Do. The translation of which – The Way Of The Intercepting Fist – inspired him to call his project *The Way Of The Exploding Fist*. Beam artist Greg Holland was given a book of Bruce Lee's moves to base *Exploding Fist*'s sprites on, and his namesake Gregg wrote graphics-handling routines to control the fighters that the artist was depicting. Gregg's focus was on creating joystick-controlled combat that felt intuitive enough to not need instruction, and as well as attacks, he devised blocking and counter moves so that players could defend themselves and then swiftly fight back.

The graphic routines Gregg was coding also addressed his objectives of giving *Exploding Fist* fluid animation and accurate detection of when kicks and punches made contact with an opponent. Neil Brennan, who had been put

DEVELOPER Q&A

RICHARD COSTELLO ON ADAPTING EXPLODING FIST FOR THE C16

How did you end up converting *Exploding Fist* to the C16?

I knew this lad through a friend of mine who had got a job working with a new company in Birmingham doing computer games. It was run by a guy who we called Lurch – because he looked like the butler out of *The Addams Family*! He had signed up all of these deals, and one of them was *Exploding Fist* on the C16. He asked if I was interested in doing that, and I said yeah. So he gave me a C16 to work on, and I took it home. I developed the conversion in my spare time, while I was working at Loughborough University writing educational software.

How did you go about converting the game?

I coded it on a BBC Micro, and the reason for that was that it had an assembler. It also had a proper keyboard, a disk drive and was generally faster. So I wrote the code on that, and then ported it over to the C16. But I didn't have an interface between the BBC and the C16, so I couldn't just fire it over. I had to assemble it, generate the hex, and then leave the printouts for my mum to type in. She's 96 now and doesn't remember helping, but I keep telling her that she's the world's oldest computer-games programmer!

How much leeway were you given?

I just had to make it look similar enough to the original that the same name could be put on it. I would have had the BBC version, and I would have tried to make the C16 version like that. So

» [C64] *Exploding Fist*'s combatants walk at a slow, steady pace, like gunfighters at high noon.

» [C64] A mistimed punch in *Exploding Fist* opens you up to a counter-attack.

in charge of the game's music and sounds, was tasked with creating crunching audio effects and battle cries to reflect the brutal combat Gregg had in mind, and producing an atmospheric soundtrack to reflect *Exploding Fist*'s Far East setting.

Although this all sounded good in theory, Gregg's approach to programming *Exploding Fist* was a concern for Beam's management, as it meant that he wouldn't produce any visible results for months. He first coded the separate routines he required in a Pascal-like programming language in order to test them, and it was only after he was satisfied with these that he linked them together and coded them in assembly language. The first playable version was limited to a two-player mode, and thanks to Gregg's careful and methodical techniques it worked first time without crashing.

Content with his progress, Gregg went off to make a coffee, only to come back five minutes later to find a queue of his colleagues waiting to play his game. Alfred soon noticed the fuss, and turning to Gregg he said, "It looks like we have a hit with this one!"

Naturally, *Exploding Fist* also required a single-player challenge, which meant that Gregg had to code AI opponents. His clever approach to this was to study his colleagues playing two-player matches, and then program his computer-controlled fighters to use one or more of the Beam employees' best strategies, depending on how skilled each AI fighter was meant to be.

As a homage to *Karate Champ*, Gregg gave *Exploding Fist* a charging bull bonus stage, where players had to knock the beast out. This intermission successfully broke up his game's core gameplay, and it provided players with a test of timing rather than one based around strategic combat. As expected by all at Beam, *The Way Of The Exploding Fist* was a

the C16 *Exploding Fist* was visually and in terms of playability a port of the BBC version. I remember being quite impressed with what the artist managed to do given that he only had monochrome to work with.

What sorts of challenges did you have?
We made the sprites smaller because of the way the C16's screen worked. We ended up not being able to do certain moves, and there were less frames of animation for each of the ones we did have. Later on, Lurch went bankrupt, but then someone from Melbourne House rang me. They said they knew I was writing the C16 *Exploding Fist*, and that when it was finished to come and see them. They loved it, and asked if I would I take £2,000 for it. So I said yes. I remember I bought a Kawasaki GZ600 with the money!

Did *Exploding Fist* lead to you converting various other fighting games?
No, that was totally coincidental. I did *Fist*, and then got a job at Gremlin. When I left I went freelance with Kevin Bulmer, and we did *Golden Axe*. With the *Mortal Kombat* games, Probe just rang me up and needed somebody to do them, and then the last thing I did was *Primal Rage*.

» [C64] If executed properly, a flying kick sends your opponent flying in *Exploding Fist*.

"WE ENDED UP NOT BEING ABLE TO DO CERTAIN MOVES, AND THERE WERE LESS FRAMES OF ANIMATION FOR EACH OF THE ONES WE DID HAVE"
RICHARD COSTELLO

massive hit when it came out in the summer of 1985, and it instantly became the home-computer beat-'em-up that all successive games of its type would be compared to.

The following year, Gregg's ambitious sequel – *Fist II: The Legend Continues* – was released to mixed reviews. Then he rounded off the series with *Exploding Fist +* in 1988, which received an unfavourable response due to its similarity to System 3's *IK+*.

The original *Exploding Fist* still holds up well, however, and although it's long since been surpassed by subsequent beat-'em-ups, the strategy at its core, its slick animation and its immersive presentation (especially that loading-screen scream) are just as compelling as they were on its release. ✱

TURBO
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Cobra Triangle

THAT'S ONE ANGULAR COBRA

RETROREVIVAL

» NES » 1989 » RARE

Back when collecting older games was a much cheaper hobby than it is today, I used to enjoy picking up collections in bulk, and it's easy to see why when I look back at an excellent NES collection I scooped up in 2007.

It might as well have been a complete NES starter kit – an American top-loading NES, with plenty of system staples like the *Mario* series, *Metroid*, *Contra*, *DuckTales* and *Ninja Gaiden*. However, the main reason I came to enjoy buying in bulk was that I'd typically end up with games that I never would have sought out on their own, but ended up loving.

In this collection, *Cobra Triangle* was the king of that category. The game puts you in charge of a speedboat in isometric environments, and each stage gives you a different task to accomplish. Sometimes you'll be racing against time to reach the finish line, with other boats and riverside guns aiming to hinder you. In other stages, you'll be disposing of mines, fighting hazardous currents and weaving through obstacles, or even doing battle against a gigantic serpent. Rare could easily have just done a straight racing game or shooting game, but the commitment to variety ensures that *Cobra Triangle* doesn't get dull. Variety isn't all that Rare's game has to offer, as it also features tight controls, a well-judged difficulty curve and impressive animation on the boat.

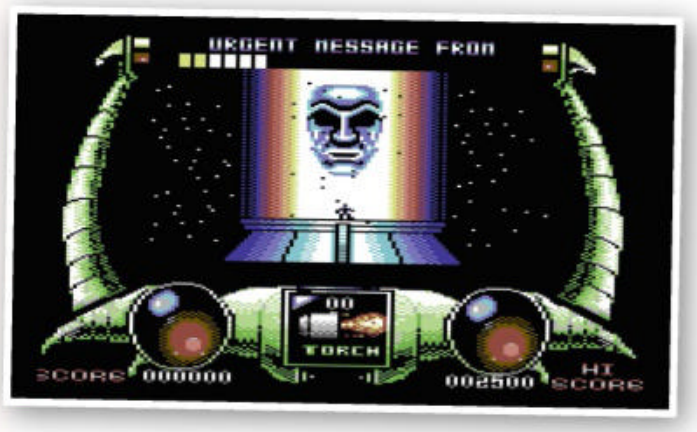
I'm genuinely surprised that a such a good game was completely unknown to me back then, but the fact that it doesn't attract a great deal of discussion is indicative of the strength of Rare's back catalogue, as well as the depth of the NES library. It's definitely a game you shouldn't overlook, and if you don't have a NES it's included in the excellent *Rare Replay* compilation for Xbox One. No matter how you play it, I think you're likely to have a good time.

STUDIO PROFILE

ENIGMA VARIATIONS

Development and publishing company Enigma Variations became prolific in the late-Eighties and early Nineties, producing numerous licensed computer games based on kids' TV shows like Postman Pat and Thomas The Tank Engine, and big title conversions for Nintendo consoles

WORDS BY RICHARD HEWISON



» [C64] Enigma Variations produced conversions for other publishers, like Digital Integration's *Extreme* on the Commodore 64.

Mark Greenshields was an experienced Commodore 64 programmer, having produced *Split Personalities* for Domark. He had also authored several programming books, and had written numerous other games, including *Hades Nebula* at Paranoid Software, which was one of the last games published by Nexus in late 1987. "After Paranoid, I went back to being a freelancer," says Mark. "I stayed down south and lived in Croydon for a while, working for Probe, Quicksilva and a few others, then I got a call from Richard Naylor, who was at Cascade Games in Harrogate."

Mark and Richard's paths had crossed a few years earlier when Richard was at Domark. "I was a self-taught programmer, learning Z80," says Richard. "I heard Domark were looking for help to add French text to a game. I had a chat with Dominic Wheatley, and it turned out they didn't have the final source code, so I edited the object code for *A View To A Kill* byte by byte, adding the French text and fixing a few bugs I came across. They were so shocked that I did all that in a week that they offered me a job."

Fast forward a few years, and Cascade had a problem project that needed a quick resolution, as Mark reveals. "They were working on the game of Paul Hardcastle's song *Nineteen*, and their programmers weren't going fast enough, so I agreed to move up to Harrogate, writing the disk and tape loaders and two parts of the Commodore 64 game."

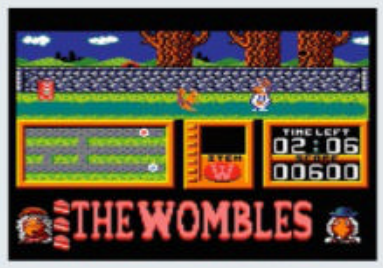
Cascade hired Mark as a full-time programmer, but not long after agreeing terms, Cascade got into financial difficulties. Mark finished his coding duties as a freelancer, but he was getting itchy feet and had a strong desire to form another development company, so he spoke to Richard about going into business together. Richard agreed, and so Enigma Variations, named after Elgar's *The Enigma Variations* opus, came into existence in early December 1988.

"Richard was into classical music more than I was, but I knew the music and the name sounded quite classy and cool," says Mark.

SELECTED TIMELINE

COUNT DUCKULA
COMMODORE 64, 1989
■ A fun platformer based on the popular cartoon. It's also known as *No Sax Please, We're Egyptian*.

POSTMAN PAT
AMIGA, 1989
■ For younger kids, a nice collection of traditional games with a postal delivery main game to enjoy.

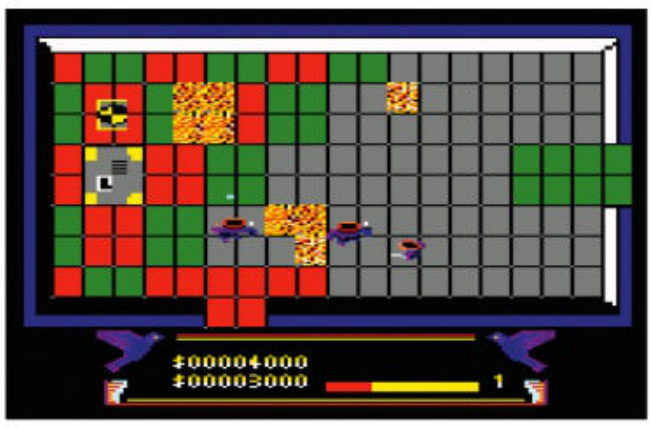


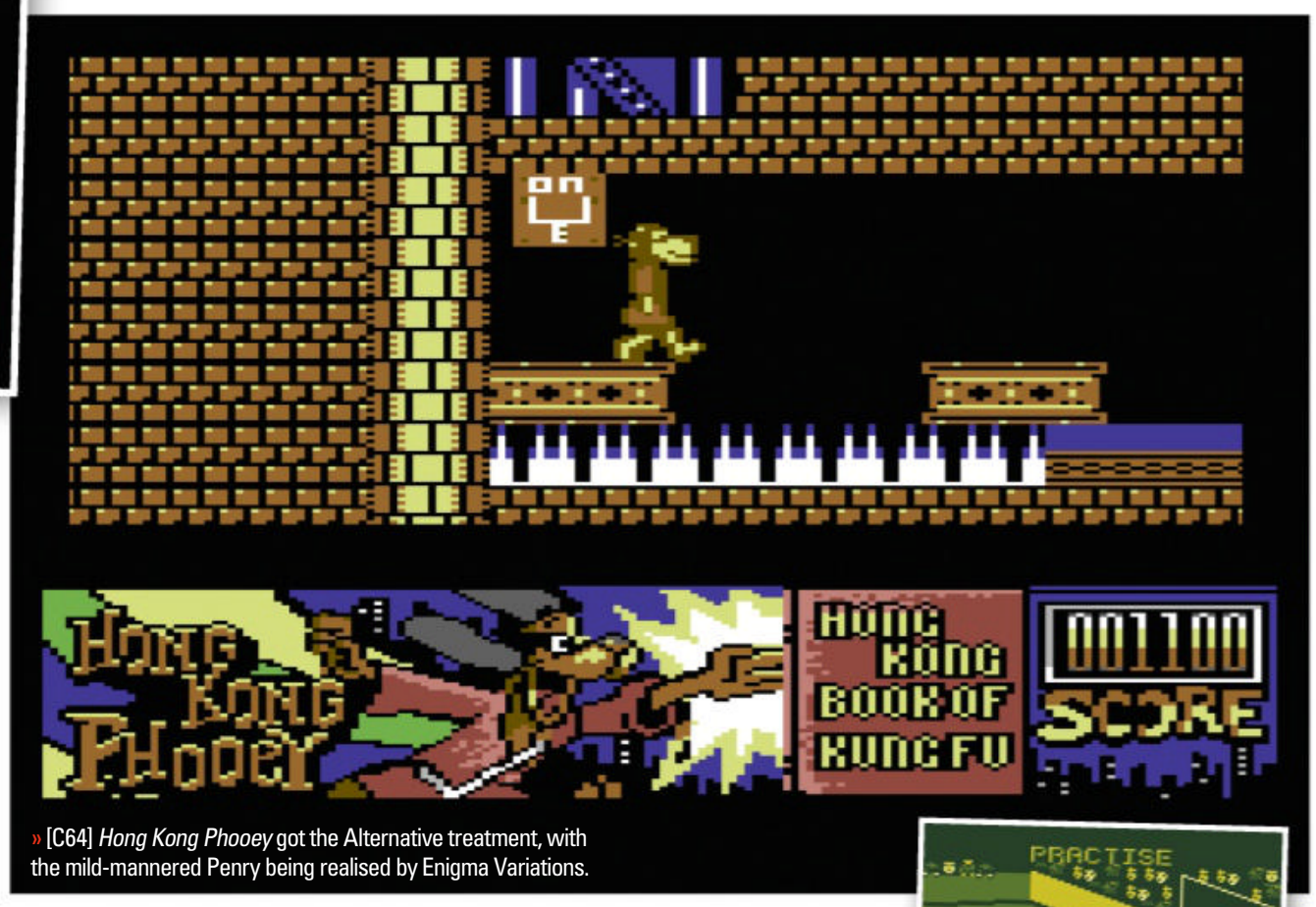
THE WOMBLES
AMSTRAD CPC, 1990
■ A colourful, simple budget game nicely evoking the TV series, written using the Enigma Code system.

THE FAMOUS FIVE
ZX SPECTRUM, 1990
■ Based on *Five On A Treasure Island*, this charming text adventure captured Enid Blyton's story perfectly.

THOMAS THE TANK ENGINE
COMMODORE 64, 1990
■ Drive Thomas around the Island Of Sodor, completing tasks assigned by the station master.

» [Amstrad CPC] Enigma Variations' *Real Stunt Experts* seemed inspired by Lee Major's early Eighties TV series *The Fall Guy*.





» [C64] *Hong Kong Phooey* got the Alternative treatment, with the mild-mannered Penry being realised by Enigma Variations.

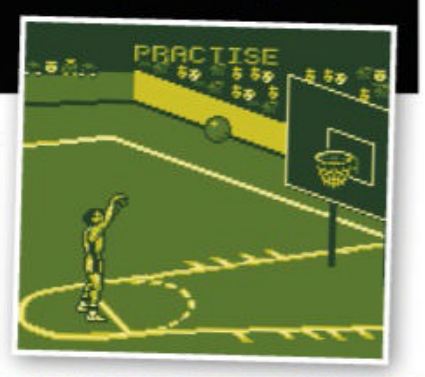
"We were young and naïve, and had no grand plan," admits Richard. "We just thought we'd write and maybe publish our own games and see how it went." Whilst both Richard and Mark were programmers, they soon hired additional developers, having signed several deals with local publishers including Alternative Software and Hi-Tec Games.

Shaun McClure was a young graphic artist who had produced loading screens for mail-order adventure specialists Zenobi Software and D&H Games. "I was a relative noob, having spent six months or so at Wise Owl Software working on *Gary Lineker's Super Skills*, and a few other minor projects," he says. "I became mates with David Bowler, and one of his friends got a job at Enigma, and that led to both me and Dave working there. I got a flat in Harrogate, literally four doors away from the office, which was Richard Naylor's house."

Programmer Andy Swann also found his way to Harrogate. "At the age of 16, we took a game I'd made with my friend Christopher Denman to Domark for appraisal. There we met Richard Naylor who was very kind, gave us some top technical tips and a copy each of *The Living Daylights* game. He also put my name in his Psion organiser!"

> "At the age of 16, we took a game I'd made with my friend Christopher Denman to Domark for appraisal"
> **Andy Swann**

Domark didn't sign their game, but after Telecomsoft published Andy's *Sir Loin* on the Silverbird budget label the following year, he was determined to get a full-time job as a games programmer. Andy was interviewed at Rare but wasn't taken on. However, a phone call out of the blue changed everything. "I'd moved to programming the Atari ST, then who should ring up, but Richard Naylor. He asked if I could still code the ZX Spectrum, I said 'yes', then he invited me for an interview." Andy got the job and moved from his parents' home in Luton to a bedsit in Harrogate and was introduced by



» [Game Boy] Enigma Variations had a close working relationship with Anco, producing a Game Boy conversion of *Tip Off*.

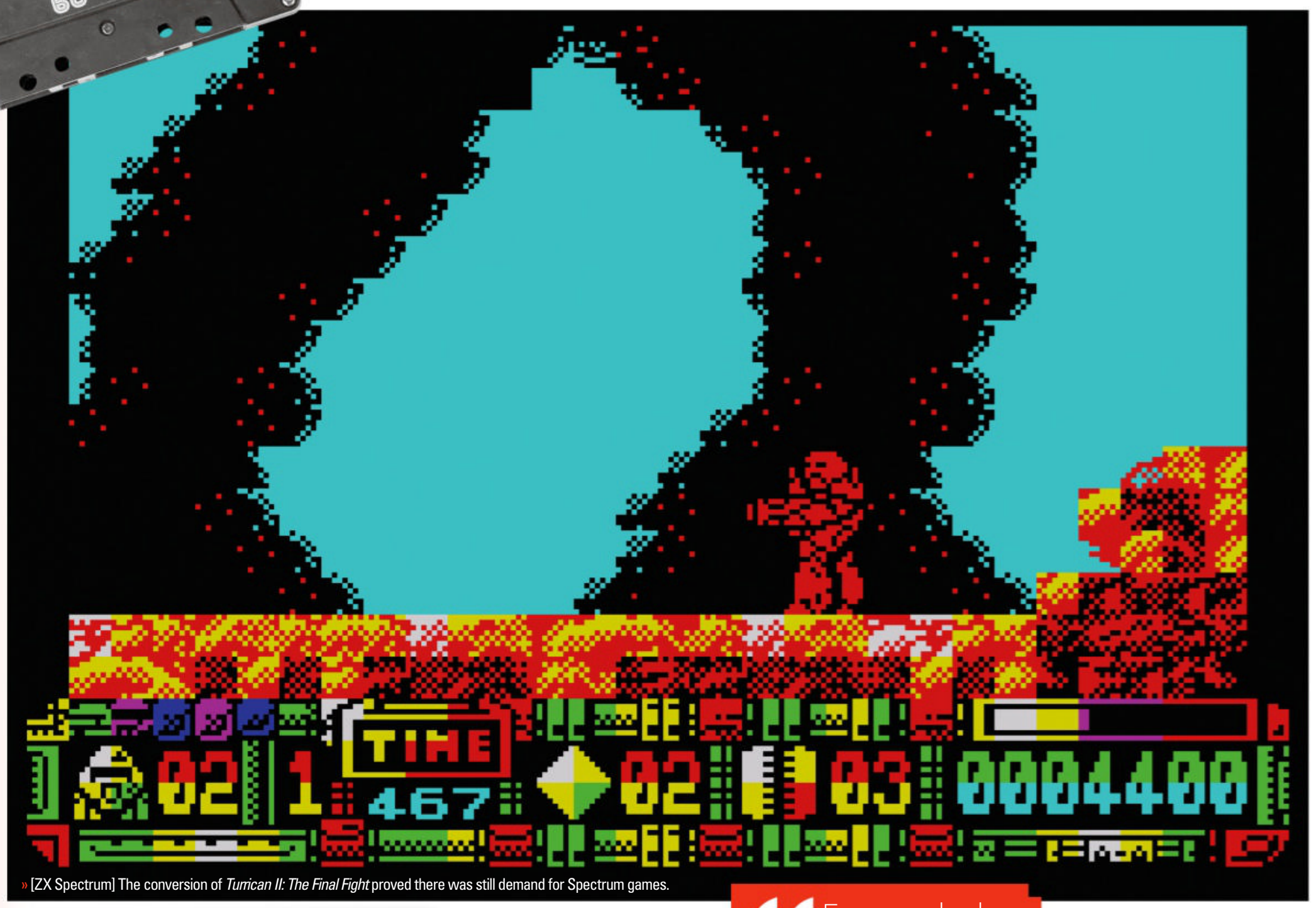
FRANKENSTEIN
AMIGA, 1992
■ A mission-based platformer, with cartoon-style graphics and challenging gameplay, set in Mary Shelley's world.

PUGSLEY'S SCAVENGER HUNT
GAME BOY, 1992
■ Converted from the SNES, this is an impressive Game Boy adaptation.

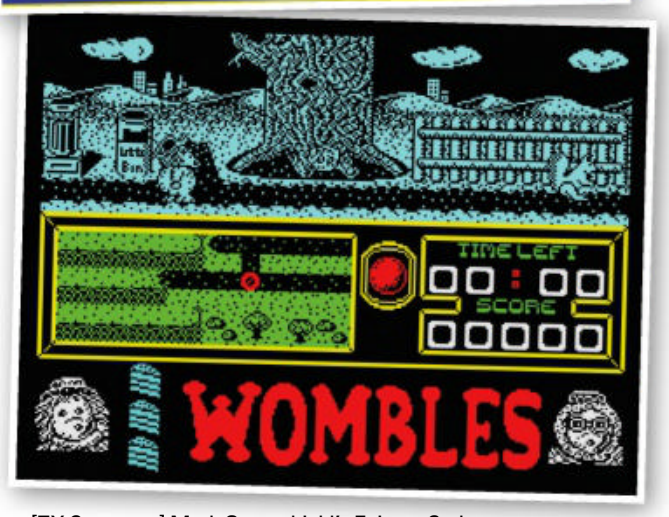
SUPER KICK OFF
SNES, 1992
■ A great conversion of *Kick Off* on the SNES, with all the playability of the original intact.

POPULOUS
GAME BOY, 1992
■ Enigma Variations' *Populous* conversion on the Game Boy was an amazing achievement.

PORKY PIG'S HAUNTED HOLIDAY
SNES, 1995
■ Started at Enigma Variations, this was an enjoyable platformer.



» [ZX Spectrum] The conversion of *Turrican II: The Final Fight* proved there was still demand for Spectrum games.



» [ZX Spectrum] Mark Greenshield's Enigma Code system helped rapidly churn out multiple versions of *The Wombles*.

16-bit programmer Mark Mason to the Programmers Development System (PDS), which Andy then used to write several games. "Everyone had jumped to the ST, Amiga or consoles, yet there was still money to be made from the Speccy," says Andy.

> "Everyone had jumped to the ST, Amiga or consoles, yet there was still money to be made from the Speccy"
> **Andy Swann**

At the start, Enigma Variations operated from Richard Naylor's house, a slightly bigger than average three-bedroom terrace with a loft conversion. Richard lived in the back bedroom, and graphic artist Peter Tattersall rented the loft conversion. Downstairs in the living room was Mark Mason on the ST and Amiga, who lived locally but would often work late and sleep on the couch.

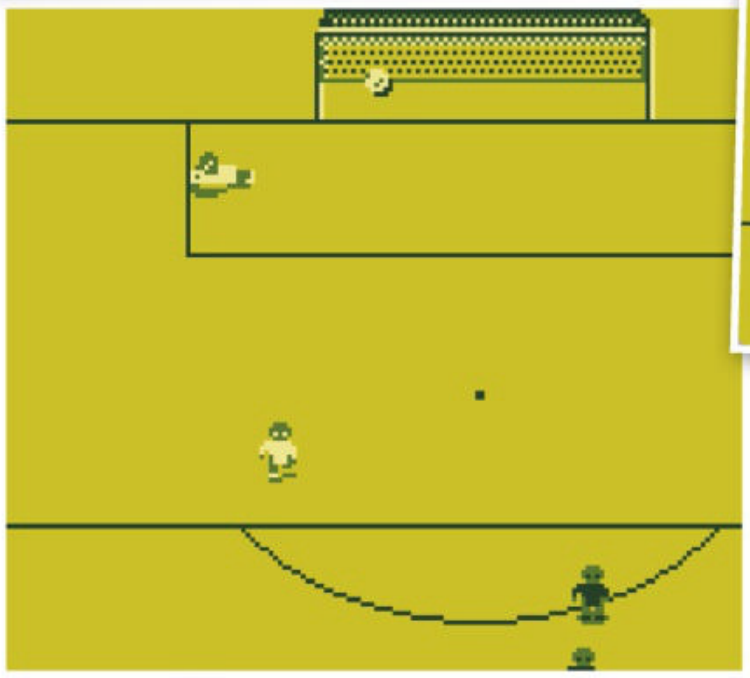
"There was also a fold-out bed that Stuart Cooke would sleep on most of the morning as he was a proper night-owl programmer," adds Andy, who worked from the dining room. Owen Heinz was another Z80 coder, with Finlay Munro, Dave Bowler, Jason McGann and Robin Holman, covering Commodore 64, Atari ST, Amiga and Z80 programming duties respectively. David Bland and Jerry Oldreive complimented Shaun McClure on the art side.

With no hard-set office hours, people often worked late into the night. "You have to remember that back then this was the norm," says Shaun. "Lots of people working and living from a terraced house wasn't ideal though, which is why they eventually got an office in the centre of Harrogate so Richard could have his house back!"

Enigma Variations became quite prolific, producing dozens of titles and became the main source of games for the new SAM Coupe home computer. For larger firms, the Coupe wasn't worth the relatively small sales revenue, but Enigma Variations secured IPs for very little outlay, and self-publishing reaped the rewards of being a medium-sized fish in that tiny pool.

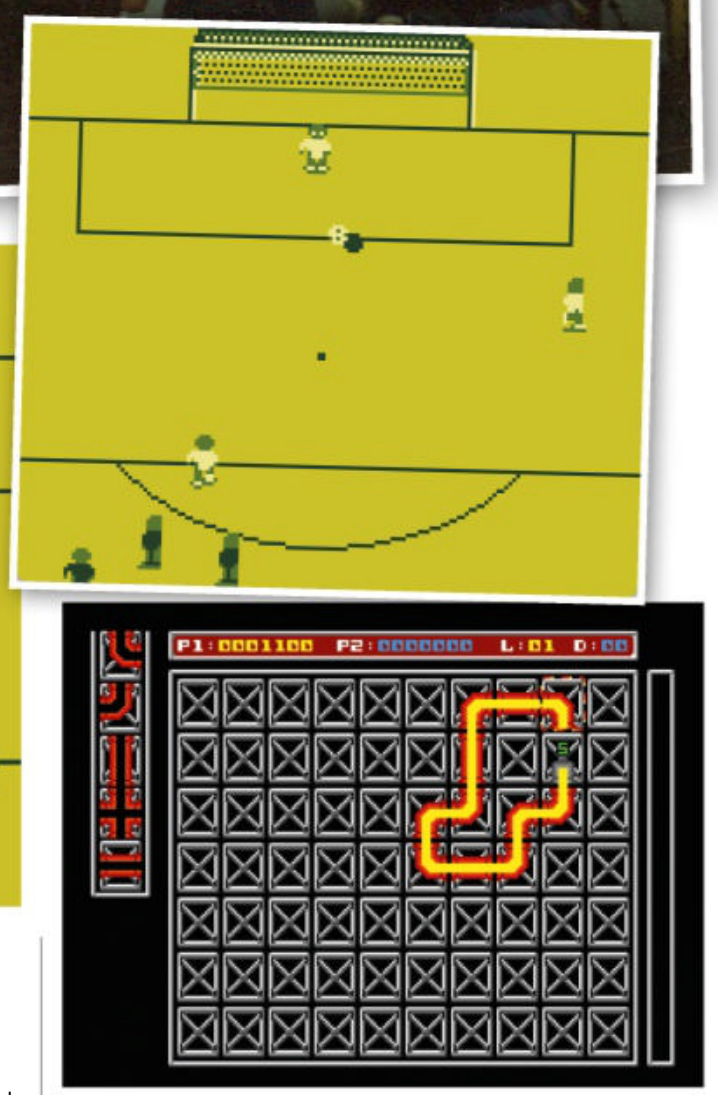
"The SAM Coupe was a nice machine," remembers Richard. "It should have done better, but most people only saw it as a super-Spectrum, whereas if you took it out

» (From left to right) Andy Swann, Robin Holman, Peter Tattersall, Finlay Munro, Mark Mason, Jason McGann and David Bland.



» [Game Boy] Mark Greenshields was never completely happy with how Enigma's Game Boy conversion of *Sensible Soccer* turned out.

of Spectrum mode it was quite a powerful computer." Mark Greenshields developed a system across 8-bit and 16-bit platforms called Enigma Code, which allowed programmers to write a game using the system's pseudo-language in around three weeks, and then assemble and export to all the other platforms with a few simple steps. Other than tweaks to the art, the game would be ready to go. Had the lawyers he spoke to understood what it was, Mark would have got the system patented, but other than Richard Naylor, nobody else engaged with it. "Richard and I created seven games across multiple formats, but nobody else wanted to use it," says Mark with regret. The system was perfect for the types of game that Enigma was producing for Alternative, but the in-house developers felt they could produce a better quality end product, whilst Mark was thinking more about the amount of time it would have saved.



» [SAM Coupe] Enigma Variations produced SAM Coupe conversions of popular titles including *Pipe Mania*.

Talking of the developers, Andy, Stuart, Jason, Mark Mason, and Pete all left Enigma in early 1990 to set up a new development team called Twilight, and in general things weren't progressing as well as Mark Greenshields had hoped. "After quite a while it became obvious that Richard and I didn't see eye to eye on how we should do certain things, so in the end I bought him out," admits Mark Greenshields. Despite the split, Richard Naylor did go on to produce *Splitz* and *Alien Olympics* for Enigma and then Dark Technologies, as well as some project management for Alternative Games. Enigma Variations continued, but Mark

WHERE ARE THEY NOW

WHAT BECAME OF THE MINDS BEHIND ENIGMA VARIATIONS?

RICHARD NAYLOR

After Enigma Variations and project managing for Alternative Games, Richard programmed some successful horse racing prediction software. Starting with Form Master, he produced a number of similar programs that used statistical analysis to predict horse racing outcomes. After many years, Richard then set up a new business in smart repairs, fixing minor collision damage on motor cars.

MARK GREENSHIELDS

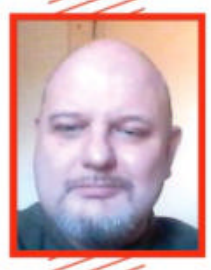
After Enigma, Mark has founded and overseen many studios including DC Studios and Firebrand Games, responsible for many hit games including *Hannah Montana*, *Trackmania*, *Need For Speed* and *Nascar Heat Mobile*. Mark is currently CEO of Psycho Hound Ltd and chief gaming officer at MetaverseME Ltd, where you will see the return of *Kick Off* on a tabletop through AR in 2023.

DARREN MELBOURNE

Darren has continued to work in the games industry and has had several high-profile roles, founding or cofounding numerous development studios. He has worked for THQ, Ubisoft, and was global licensing director at Eidos/Square Enix. He was cofounder of Playdemic, the creators of *Gold Clash* and also cofounder of Retro Games Ltd, with The A500 Mini its most-recent product.

ANDY SWANN

Andy went on to cofound Twilight, working there for four years, then on to Team17, before settling at Sony Europe, where he has worked on PS2 *Hardware: Online Arena* and PS4 *Hardware: Rivals* titles. Andy is now actively in research and development, celebrating over 25 years at Sony in console development.



SHAUN MCCLURE

After leaving Enigma Variations, Shaun initially worked as a freelance artist for Vivid Image, where much of his time was spent on a game called *Time Machine*. He then joined The Sales Curve and worked on *NARC*, *St Dragon*, *Rod-Land*, and other titles, before later working for Imagitec, Gremlin, and Activision in the United States.

» [SNES] *Porky Pig* was a technically nice platformer on the SNES reminiscent of *Sonic The Hedgehog*.

» [Amiga] No wonder Postman Pat had problems delivery mail if he was playing Snakes & Ladders.

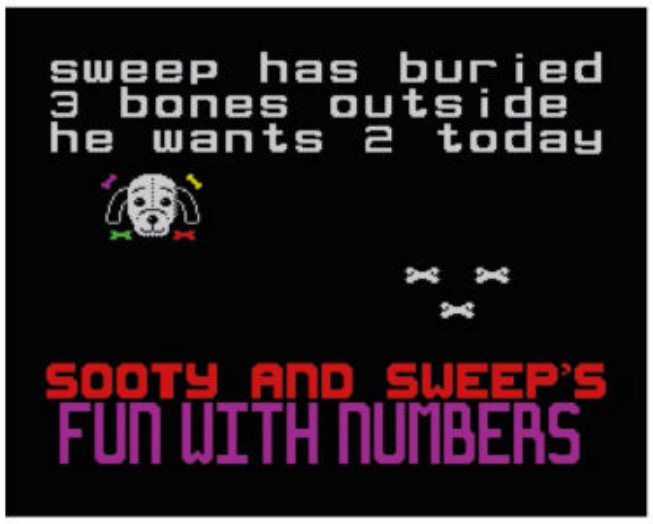
turned to a friend and former colleague to move the company in a new direction. Darren Melbourne had known Mark since they were teenagers. They became firm friends and had previously worked together as Paranoid Software before Mark went freelance and Darren moved on to The Sales Curve. However, like Mark, Darren soon yearned to return to development, so he left to set up a new team with some former Catalyst Coders developers. "Unfortunately, that petered out before it really got started," says Darren candidly. "So instead, I joined another development team called Pantheon Software, and we did a few titles including the Commodore 64 conversion of *Speedball* for Image Works."

Despite doing a superb job on *Speedball*, Pantheon struggled to get regular or significant work, and the three joint owners realised they were never going to be large enough to cope with the demands of modern development. Pantheon was dissolved, and Darren then had a six-month stint as a life insurance and pensions salesman, also setting up a telesales division for Saniflo. Darren and Mark had kept in contact throughout, and in late-1991 they had an honest discussion. "Darren was quite disillusioned at the time, selling insurance and bog roll so I said to him, 'Why don't you come up to Harrogate and work with me?'" remembers Mark.

The allure to return to games development was strong, so Darren joined Enigma Variations in March 1992. Mark bounced between programming and the paperwork side of the business, and Darren concentrated on the more creative design side and exploiting his industry contacts. "Before I arrived, they had a few clients and were fortunate to know Imagineer in Japan, as Anil Gupta had a distribution deal with them for Anco titles but there was no global vision," says Darren. "They hadn't proactively gone externally to find other work. I came in acting as the studio development director and head of production, and Mark and I jointly sourced new projects into the company." Enigma Variations duly expanded its client base,

DNA OF ENIGMA VARIATIONS

THE KEY INGREDIENTS OF SUCCESS

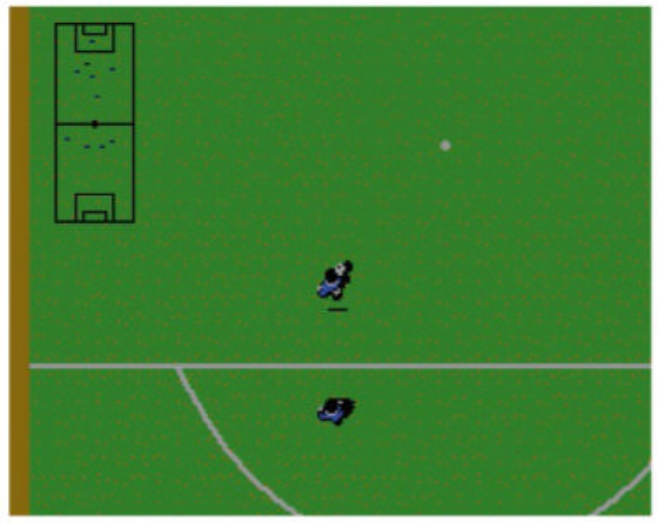


KIDS' TV

■ Mostly through its dealings with Alternative Software, Enigma Variations produced a whole collection of budget games and educational titles based on kids' TV shows, including *The Wombles*, *Postman Pat*, *Sooty And Sweep*, *Thomas The Tank Engine*, *Super Ted* and *Count Duckula*.

SELF-PUBLISHING

■ Enigma Variations self-published a handful of games, buying licences itself for IPs including *The Famous Five* and *Defenders Of The Earth*. The latter was a TV cartoon series featuring, among other characters, Flash Gordon. *The Famous Five* was based on a popular Enid Blyton book.



KICK OFF

■ Enigma Variations wrote the NES, Game Boy and SNES conversions of *Kick Off*/*Super Kick Off* for Anco and Imagineer, as well as the Commodore 64 conversion. Years later, Mark Greenshields bought the *Kick Off* IP and has plans for a new game launch this year.

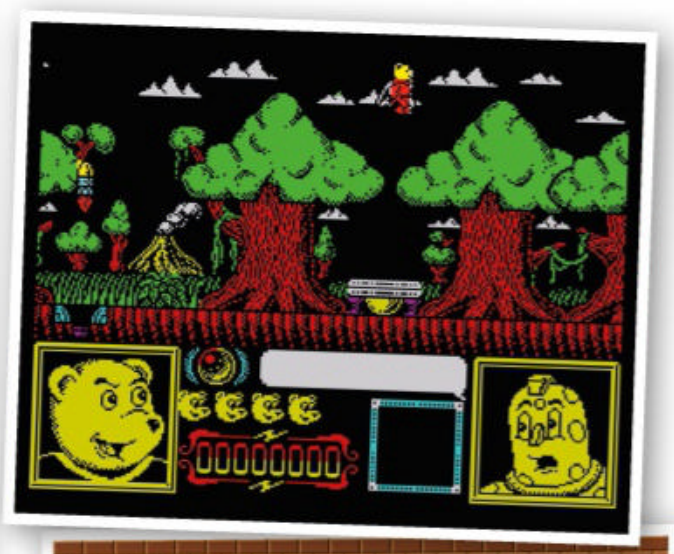
» [SAM Coupe] *Magic Caves* was one of the SAM Coupe titles included in Enigma's *Mind Games* series.

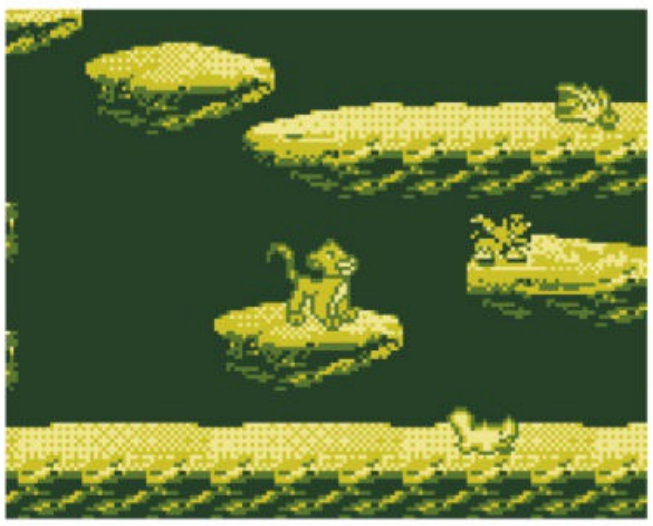
securing game conversions for Nintendo's NES, Game Boy and SNES. It was getting plenty of work, but nowhere near the financial rewards it needed or deserved. Only being paid a lump sum with no royalty rate per unit sold also didn't help. "We turned out some incredible stuff," says Darren. "But we stupidly allowed what we quoted for console conversions to be set by what a client told us other developers were charging, and we believed them!"

That lack of business acumen ultimately cost Enigma Variations dearly, and it closed in 1994. It was decided to try and complete the handful of unfinished titles via Phoenix Interactive Entertainment or Dark Technologies (the 'Da' from Darren, and the 'rk' from Mark), but without renegotiating the contracts, some games were finished with no allocated budget at all, with several corners cut as a result. Looking back decades later, Mark is quite philosophical about the experience. "We were just a bunch of lads who were doing what we wanted to do." ✱

> "I came in acting as the studio development director and head of production, and Mark and I jointly sourced new projects into the company"
> **Darren Melbourne**

» [ZX Spectrum] Some of Enigma's games were educational, like *Sooty's Fun With Numbers*.





GAME BOY CONVERSIONS

■ As it became more experienced on Nintendo consoles, Enigma Variations became the go-to company for Game Boy conversions, including Anco's *Tip Off* and Disney's *Lion King* platformer, ultimately finished by Dark Technologies after Enigma Variation's demise.

SAM COUPE

■ Enigma Variations produced titles for the SAM Coupe computer. Conversions of *Defenders Of The Earth*, *The Famous Five*, *Gilbert* and original games including *Sphera* and a couple of *Mind Games* compilations made Enigma the most prolific publisher for that short-lived format.

ULTIMATE GUIDE

ALIENS

OF ALL THE GAMES BASED ON ALIENS, NONE HAVE CAPTURED THE CLAUSTROPHOBIC TENSION AND RELENTLESS ACTION AS WELL AS KONAMI'S COIN-OP. JOIN RETRO GAMER AS WE DISCOVER WHY THIS ARCADE GAME IS MORE THAN JUST ANOTHER BUG HUNT

WORDS BY MARTYN CARROLL

Released in 1990, Konami's *Aliens* was not the first videogame based on James Cameron's hit 1986 movie. In the four years prior, Activision had released two separate tie-ins for 8-bit computers, while Square had created its own take for the Japanese MSX.

In fact, the 1990 coin-op was not even Konami's first *Aliens* game. Well, officially it was, but the *Contra* series had already plundered the movie for ideas and imagery. The first *Contra* game featured two alien bosses that were clearly inspired by HR Giger's famous creature design, while *Super Contra* featured hundreds of 'Warrior' aliens running amok in a familiar looking 'hive'. This begs the question: why did Konami go to the expense of acquiring the official licence in 1990 when it could have carried on churning out *Contra* games? Especially as the movie was four years old by this point.

The movie was a little old but it was far from forgotten. You have to remember that movies percolated more slowly than they do now. It debuted in US cinemas in July 1986, travelled around the world over the next six months, hit home video and laserdisc in 1987, was broadcast on terrestrial TV in 1989, and was released as an extended *Special Edition* in 1991. And each time its status as a sci-fi action horror classic was further cemented. It's also worth noting that the film was a significant hit around the world and in particular Japan, where its box office earnings were second only to those of the US. And finally, there was constant chatter around the next entry in the series, *Alien 3*, which had been in active development since 1987. All this meant that *Aliens* was a shrewd bit of licensing on Konami's part.

"WHY DID KONAMI GO TO THE EXPENSE OF ACQUIRING THE OFFICIAL LICENCE WHEN IT COULD HAVE CARRIED ON CHURNING OUT CONTRA GAMES?"

The game was directed by Satoru Okamoto and overseen by Koji Hiroshita, two veterans of the *Contra* series, so it naturally draws on their *Contra* template. You can't jump and shoot in eight directions, but it is a standard side-scrolling shooter interspersed with vertical-scrolling and into-the-screen sections. Co-op support is included, and while it's assumed that you're playing as Ellen Ripley and Corporal Hicks, their names are not stated anywhere and they definitely ▶

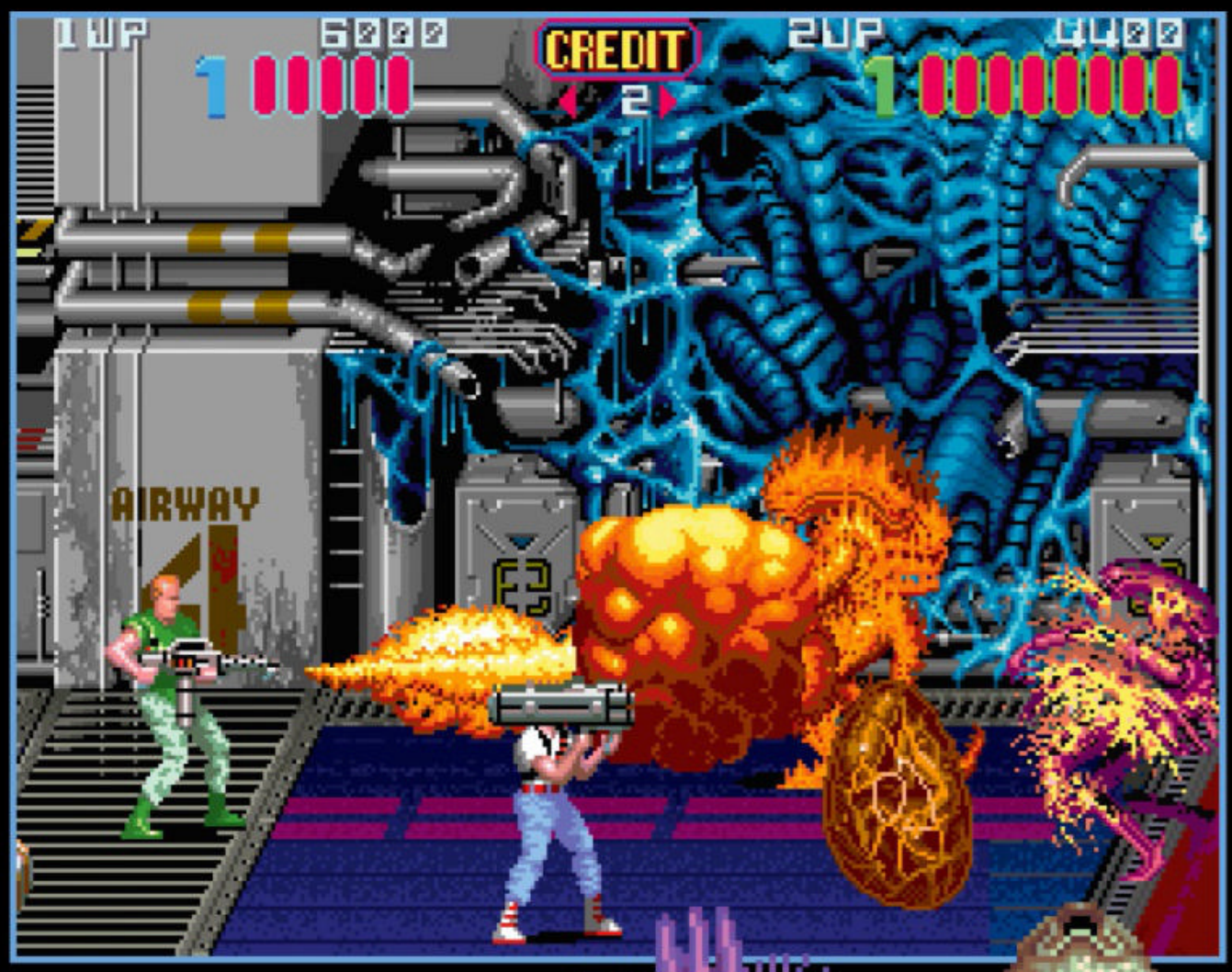
» [Arcade] Some examples of overt *Alien* imagery in Konami's first *Contra* arcade game.

» Konami in Japan utilised some excellent art for its arcade flyer, while over in America it took… a different tack.

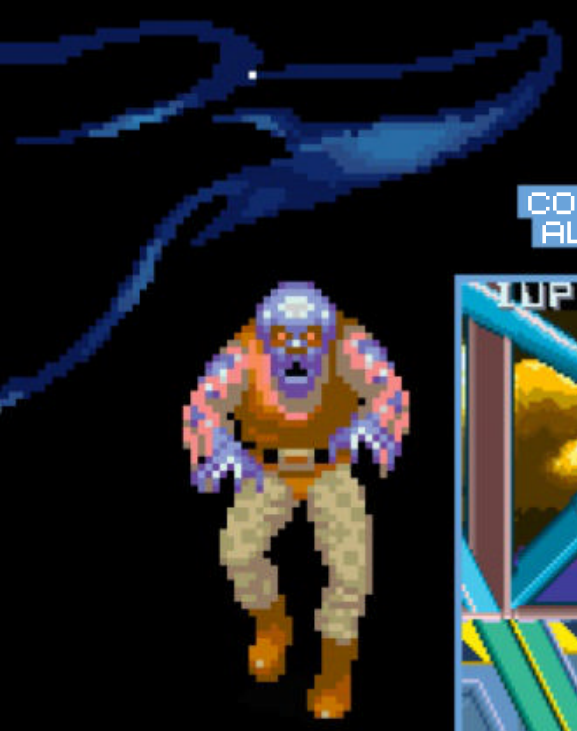
ARACHNID ALIEN

FACEHUGGER

CHESTBURSTER



» [Arcade] Shoot them or torch them – regular enemies go up real easy.



COLONY ALIEN

ALIEN EGG

ZOMBIE COLONIST

» [Arcade] The APC scenes look pretty but they lack the levels of finesse seen elsewhere in the game.

EAST VS WEST

HOW KONAMI'S GAME DIFFERED DEPENDING ON WHERE YOU PLAYED IT

With Konami's coin-ops it was often a case of 'why have one set of ROMs when eight will do?'. For *Aliens* there are indeed eight different sets and they can be broadly split into two groups: East (two Japanese sets and one Asia set) and West (four World sets and one US set).

The East sets differ in numerous ways. The main change is that the two APC shooting scenes have been completely removed, so there's no sub-mission where you rescue Newt. On the other hand, the East sets feature two unique enemy types that are not present in the West. The colours have also been tweaked: in the East the enemies are less garish and more organic-looking. Finally, the East versions are noticeably easier, with weapons appearing more regularly and all enemies taking less damage (apart from the final battle with the Queen, who is harder to defeat and uses a new 'replicating' attack). The changes to colours and difficulty are typical, but it's hard to fathom why Konami removed the APC scenes (especially as the graphics for them are stored in the ROMs, so it's not a case of the East sets being an earlier version).

To confuse matters even more, there is a further difference between the World sets. For some reason, sets three and four feature no health pick-ups and you can't hold down the fire button when using the standard Pulse Rifle (you have to keep tapping it), which raises the game's difficulty to "real pretty shit" levels.

» [Arcade] It doesn't take long to spot changes. Note the different coloured aliens and random oil drums that appear in the Japan and Asia versions (left).

» [Arcade] Meet the two new standard alien types that are exclusive to the Japan and Asia builds. The right one also appears as a boss earlier in the game.

BOSS RUSH

HOW TO RID LV-426 OF ITS DEADLY GUARDIANS

COLONY BOSS

■ This long-necked creepy crawly lunges continuously. When you destroy its head, it spits pulsating chunks of acid in your direction.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

It's easy. Stand dead centre and just keep shooting, casually moving to evade its attack. It's trickier when it starts spitting, but just keep moving and firing.

FACTORY BOSS

■ An armoured alien that keeps tucking itself up into a ball and bouncing around. When it unfurls, it spits out rebounding blobs of plasma.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Another easy one. Avoid it when it rolls up as you can't damage it. Then, when it opens, fire crouching shots at it and the plasma will fly over your head.

NEST BOSS

■ The boss is static, so it uses its four, erm, appendages to thwack you. It has a turtle-like head that spits (spot a theme here?) alien spawn at you.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Things are hotting up now. While you can attack its appendages, it's best to just concentrate on the head when it pops up. Shoot or simply avoid the spawn.

BEETLE XENO (ROUND 1)

■ This strange-looking beast scuttles around the screen, protected by a bunch of indestructible orbs that spin around it. It has no direct attack.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

You can't hurt it when the orbs are spinning, so wait until they gather up and get in as many shots as you can. Your evasion game needs to be A+.

JUMPING BUGS

■ The oddest boss battle of the lot. Four tiny aliens hop around, but here's the thing, when you shoot them they briefly become massive.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Don't worry about their size, just keep moving and shooting. Eventually they stay large, which actually makes them easier to target and destroy.

ELECTRICAL XENOS

■ This livewire duo keeps darting from left to right. Occasionally they stop and face each other, and appear to recharge themselves.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

The trick is to stay low and focus on one of them. When there's one left it becomes a more standard battle – just watch out for those charged particles.

THE QUEEN (ROUND 1)

■ The Queen is static, like in the film, but she will spit acid at you. More problematic are the Warriors that deliver eggs that hatch Facehuggers.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

The Queen's egg sac is split into eight sections and you have to destroy them one by one – everything else is a distraction. Burn everything with fire!

BEETLE XENO (ROUND 2)

■ The beetle is back, and so are its orbs – except now they float freely around and can be destroyed (although they are regularly replenished).

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

The orbs lock onto your position, so keep moving around the bottom of the screen and concentrate all of your fire on the boss. It may take a while.

THE QUEEN (ROUND 2)

■ The Queen returns and she's now far more dexterous and deadly. She spits streams of acid and will try and swipe you with her tail.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Keep moving right and dive into the Power Loader, then keep whacking her until the airlock opens. Grab her and drop her through to finish the game. Well done!

» [Arcade] The handy motion tracker pops up when you venture into the air ducts.

▶ don't look like their movie counterparts – this Ripley is blonde for a start! In many ways *Aliens* is like an unofficial *Contra* game in which you could be playing Lance and Bill – or at least Lance and Jill. We can only assume that the licence did not extend to include the actors' likenesses.

Liberties are also taken with the aliens. Facehuggers, Chestbursters, Warrior aliens and the Queen all appear, as you'd expect, but the expected enemies are joined by a circus sideshow of Konami's own creations including gun-toting zombies, spider-like things, and snappy airborne nasties that would seem more at home in Cameron's earlier flick *Piranha II: Flying Killers*. Some of the bosses are even more outlandish. At least you can kill 'em all with fire – and missiles, lasers and bombs. At the end of the game you even get to jump inside a Power Loader and use its mechanical arms to whomp the alien Queen around the head.

Once you've worn the Queen down you get to drop her through the airlock and into the depths of space, pretty much like in the film. Alternatively, you can choose to ignore the Power Loader and blast her with your Pulse Rifle instead, which is trickier and takes longer. To properly finish the game you need to complete two playthroughs, so this gives expert players the option of defeating the Queen in a different way on each loop. What the final confrontation also highlights is the overall quality of the graphics. The sprites are large and well drawn, and the game holds up even in the sections where the screen is crawling with critters. The backgrounds too, which depict locations from the film like the colony complex and the atmosphere processor, are also really well done, showing all the signs of the aliens' infestation. Like most Konami coin-ops, *Aliens* uses several custom graphics chips to bring the game to life, employing the same video hardware as *Thunder Cross*, *Gradius III* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (a game which it shares several similarities with).

The graphics and gameplay earned praise from most of the gaming press. "I loved this game," beamed Jaz Rignall in his 91% review for *C&VG*. "It's fast and tough… and the graphics are simply brilliant with some truly disgusting aliens to splatter. Play it!" We say *most* because an unnamed reviewer in *Commodore User* was less impressed, awarding Konami's game a miserable 44%. "The graphics are uniformly bland and drab, the controls are irritatingly unresponsive, and the action is samey and dull." A more level-headed review appeared in *Zero*, courtesy of Sean Kelly, "It's brilliant and has some really nice touches. This will be huge in the arcades and absolutely massive when it hits the home machines."

Like Sean, everyone who enjoyed *Aliens* in the arcades expected Konami to develop a home conversion. It might have been too much for 8-bit machines, but it surely would have been a good fit for 16-bit consoles. But it never happened, despite strong rumours. In the November 1990 issue of *Mean Machines*, Jaz Rignall responded to a reader who'd ▶

"THE EXPECTED ENEMIES ARE JOINED BY A CIRCUS SIDESHOW OF KONAMI'S OWN CREATIONS"

WE NEED GUNS, LOTS OF GUNS

LET'S INTRODUCE YOU TO SOME PERSONAL FRIENDS OF OURS...

MISSILE

■ Fires tracking missiles that whiz off and attempt to target enemies. It's good for hitting hostiles that are not in your line of sight but poor at clearing a path and often leaves you exposed. One to avoid.

3 BULLETS

■ Similar to the Missile, only it fires three rockets in the direction you're facing. It's powerful, has good range, and the rockets are quite spread out so it's hard to miss, making it a good choice for beginners.

3 WAY

■ This useful weapon blasts out three beams in a wide arc in front of you. Its spread is excellent and it's brilliant for clearing congested areas, but it does lack power so don't bring this into a boss battle.

FLAME

■ The mighty flamethrower looks so damn cool, burning up most baddies on contact. Its range is limited, but in terms of destructive power nothing else comes close. There's a reason why expert players favour this.

BOMBS

■ Dotted throughout the game, and thrown by pressing the crouching shoot button, these deadly devices detonate when they hit the ground and unleash a strong blast. Fire them off when things get too busy.

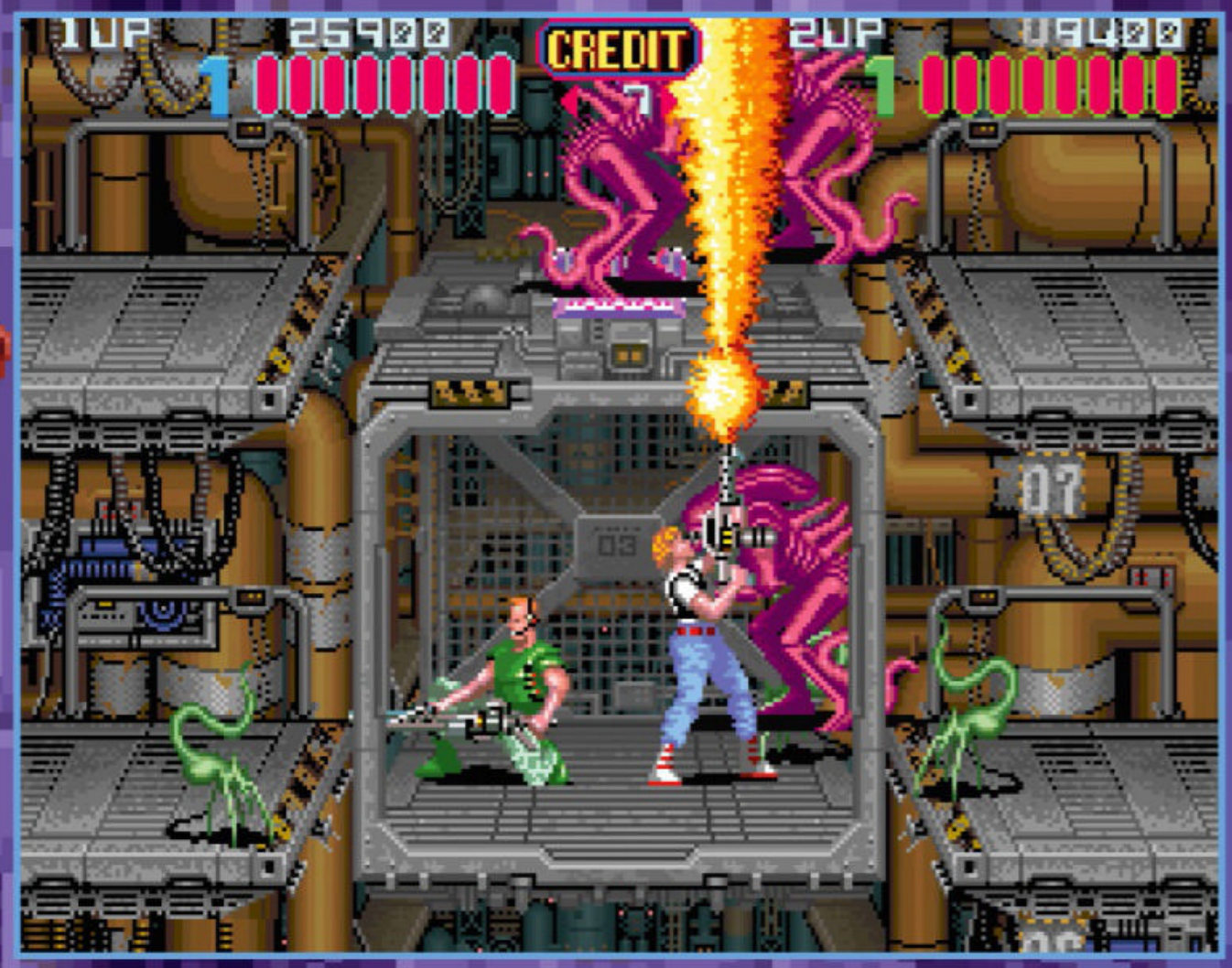
SUPER BOMBS

■ Just like normal bombs, only these completely clear the screen of all hostiles. There's only one pick-up in the game, in the section with the water channel, and it contains two Super Bombs. Fire and forget.

"THE SPRITES ARE LARGE AND WELL DRAWN, AND THE GAME HOLDS UP EVEN WHEN THE SCREEN IS CRAWLING WITH CRITTERS"

written in to ask if the game was indeed coming home. "You'll be pleased to hear that a Mega Drive version of *Aliens* is in the pipeline," replied Jaz, "but I don't think it'll appear until the middle of next year." We asked Jaz about this, and while he can't recall the exact details, he definitely remembers hearing from an insider at Sega that Konami was developing it for the Mega Drive. Undeterred, we went to Emil Heidkamp, who was senior vice president of Konami Of America at the time, to find out more. "*Aliens* was a big hit for Konami's coin-op division," he tells us. "I really don't remember why we didn't convert this game to the home machines, but at the time Konami had a literal surfeit of great games that we were able to choose from. We were always trying to balance our mix between coin-op action games, sport games and licensed properties such as *Top Gun* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. It was definitely a classy problem to have."

So it seems like *Aliens* got lost in the shuffle back then and entered the ill-fated realm of the unconverted. Over the years Konami has released a number of retro collections, most recently in 2019 to celebrate its 50th anniversary, but the game has never been included. This is presumably because it would involve re-licensing the property from Fox/Disney – yet that's what Koch Media did to be able to include *Alien Vs Predator* on its Capcom Home Arcade device. Konami has re-released licensed properties like *TMNT* and *The Simpsons* in the past, so maybe it's not truly "game over, man!" for an *Aliens* conversion – especially as the *Alien* franchise remains so popular with new games, movies and even a TV series on the horizon. In the meantime if you want to legally play Konami's *Aliens* then you might just find the cab lurking in the darkest corner of an arcade *somewhere* in the galaxy.



» [Arcade] Shoot them or torch them – regular enemies go down real easy.

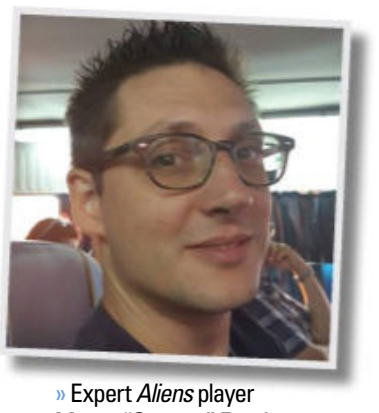
» [Arcade] "Get away from her you bitch – and down into this here airlock if you really wouldn't mind, thanks."

» [Arcade] Konami's developers clearly thought, "We've got 512 colours and we're damn well gonna use all of them."

» [Arcade] The *Aliens* coin-op later made a cameo appearance in Konami's *The Simpsons* arcade game.

HIGH SCORE Q&A

WE SETTLE THE SCORE WITH THE GAME'S WORLD-RECORD HOLDER MARCO FRATTINO



» Expert *Aliens* player Marco "Gemant" Frattino.

Can you start by telling us a bit about yourself?

I'm 46 years old and I live in Trieste, Italy. I'm a full-time high-scoring enthusiast and I manage the official database of Italian arcade records.

What's your history with Konami's game?

I first played *Aliens* in a bar back in 1990. At the time I could complete the first loop with one credit, but couldn't get through the second without using another credit. I started playing again in 2005 and in the meantime my skills had greatly increased. I trained for an entire month and on 6 July 2005 I achieved a score of 1,695,200 which I was happy with. My goal was higher – around 1.8 million points – but since each attempt required a game session of around three hours, and I was only able to try once a day, I gave up after a certain number of attempts from reaching my goal.

Is there a reason why you play the Japanese version over all the other versions?

Only the Japanese version was distributed in my city which differs from the versions distributed in the West. When I started playing in 2005 I knew that the highest record in the world had been made on the Japanese version and it was around 1,624,000. Beating this was my initial goal, but there was no information on the best techniques and the best MAME replays available on the web were just over a million. I had to study the game and find the techniques on my own. For me the real record to beat is the Japanese one. Japan is the country where the fiercest scoring challenges in arcade games took place compared to other countries. Because of this my reference has always been the Japanese record.

Most players stick with the flamethrower weapon. Would you recommend using any of the other weapons?

The flamethrower is the best weapon, it's great for completing every stage of the game. However, if your aim is to earn a high score, it is best to switch to the laser cutter [3 Way] in specific areas of the game.

Is there anything left you want to achieve on *Aliens*? Any unfinished business?

I'm satisfied with my high score. However, at the end of 2005 a friend discovered that you can score infinite points by exploiting a bug that resets the time available in a specific stage. This discovery deprived me of the motivation to improve my score. Plus, *Aliens* is one of my favourite games, but I have a greater passion for *Golden Axe*!

» [Arcade] Marco achieved his world-record high score on the Japanese version of the game in 2005.

Hardware Heaven

TurboGrafx-16

» **MANUFACTURER:** NEC » **YEAR:** 1989
» **COST:** $199.99 (launch), £200+ (today, boxed), £100+ (today, unboxed)

When NEC adapted the PC Engine hardware for the North American console market in 1989, most observers expected the TurboGrafx-16 to quickly leapfrog the Genesis, as the company was an electronics giant and Sega had struggled with the Master System. Things didn't quite go that way, though – the system didn't have the head start that its Japanese counterpart had enjoyed over the Mega Drive in Japan, NEC's staff weren't experienced in the games business and third-party software support was hard to come by.

One of the most heavily derided decisions NEC made was to redesign the hardware. The small form factor of the PC Engine, enabled by Hudson Soft's elegant hardware design, was junked in favour of a large box with a huge and very ugly expansion-port cover. The TurboGrafx-16 still didn't include composite output or multiple controller ports as standard, despite the expanded size. Despite its failure to crack America, the machine retains a cult following to this day and fetches a pretty penny accordingly. ✱

SUPPLIED BY
EVAN AMOS

TurboGrafx-16 fact

■ European TurboGrafx consoles were based on the American design, with slight cosmetic tweaks. Despite being manufactured and ready to go, poor American sales caused NEC to cancel a full launch.

PROCESSORS: HUDSON SOFT HUC6280A 6502-BASED 8-BIT CPU (3.58 MHZ OR 7.16 MHZ)

GRAPHICS: HUDSON SOFT HUC6270A VDP, UP TO 512X242 DISPLAY (256X239 TYPICAL), 482 COLOURS FROM A PALETTE OF 512, 64 SPRITES ON SCREEN

RAM: 8KB MAIN MEMORY, 64KB VIDEO MEMORY

MEDIA: HUCARD (UP TO 20 MEGABIT), OPTIONAL CD-ROM WITH ADD-ON

AUDIO: SIX PSG CHANNELS

ESSENTIAL GAME

R-Type

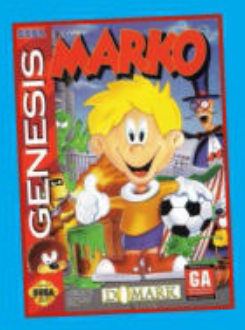
Irem's arcade hit received fine conversions to many formats in the late-Eighties, but the version that Hudson Soft published for the PC Engine was practically untouchable. It played as good as it looked, and it looked indistinguishable from the arcade game at first glance, with the only flaw being that the game had to be split across two HuCards. The American version manages to fix that, bringing both halves of the game to a single TurboChip, and it's that rare superiority to the Japanese release that earns the game this coveted spot.

THE MAKING OF

MARKO'S MAGIC FOOTBALL

WHEN LONDON-BASED DOMARK BECAME A SEGA THIRD-PARTY LICENSEE IN 1990, IT KICKED OFF A SUCCESSFUL PERIOD FOR THE PUBLISHER. HAVING ESTABLISHED ITSELF WITH A SERIES OF ARCADE CONVERSIONS EARLY IN THE DECADE, IT WAS TIME TO CREATE SOMETHING TOTALLY ORIGINAL. AT LEAST, THAT WAS THE PLAN...

WORDS BY GRAEME MASON



IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** DOMARK
- **DEVELOPER:** THE CARTOON MAVERICKS (THE KREMLIN)
- **RELEASED:** 1994
- **PLATFORM:** MEGA DRIVE, MEGA-CD, GAME GEAR, SNES
- **GENRE:** PLATFORMER

The story of *Marko's Magic Football*, a Hollywood-pitch style union (platform games are popular! Football games are popular! Let's combine them!), begins not at Domark but at fellow 8-bit software house, Digital Integration. Working at DI was Tony West, who, along with his brother Chris, had already developed the well-received shoot-'em-up *RISK* for The Edge. When Digital Integration freelancer John Kavanagh joined Domark in 1989, Tony got word that the publisher was looking for development teams to partner with. Along with Chris, Colin Boswell, Marcus Goodey and Paul Margrave, he formed Quixel.

"Domark had just acquired the rights to the new James Bond film, *Licence To Kill*," says Tony. "We were contracted to do the C64, Spectrum, Amstrad, Atari ST, Amiga and PC versions." After the mixed critical success of Domark's previous *Bond* adaptation, *The Living Daylights*, Quixel did a decent job on the second Timothy Dalton movie, securing the arcade conversion *Cyberball*.

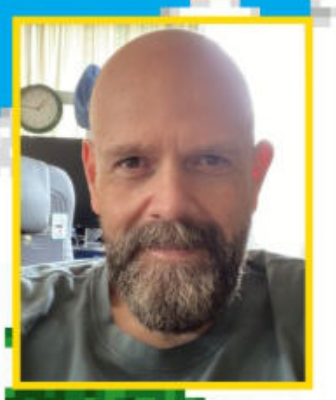
Like many larger UK software houses, Domark had concluded that it needed high-profile arcade conversions to survive. The results were mixed, to say the least, and Quixel's *Cyberball* continued that trend; but a significant change was just around the corner for both developer and publisher. "Domark was looking at getting into console games," recalls Tony, "but Sega and

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

PRINCE OF PERSIA
SYSTEM: APPLE II, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1990

SUPER SPACE INVADERS
SYSTEM: AMIGA, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1991

JAMES BOND 007: THE DUEL (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE, MASTER SYSTEM, GAME GEAR
YEAR: 1993



» Michael Carr-Robb-John handled the character control and ball physics of *Marko's Magic Football*.

» Tony West was instrumental in the creation of *Marko's Magic Football*.

» After his European tour, Jolyon Myers featured heavily in magazine previews.

» [Mega Drive] A sludge monster threatens Marko beneath the streets.

Nintendo both required publishers to have their own in-house development teams." Domark enquired if Quixel would be interested in becoming its team, and it agreed, forming The Kremlin in Addlestone, Surrey. Predictably, a series of arcade conversions, including *Pit-Fighter*, *Klax* and *Super Space Invaders* followed, alongside conversion jobs such as the Master System port of *Desert Strike*. However, original games remained thin on the ground before half of Domark's founding pair, Mark Strachan (the 'mark' of Domark, with the 'Do' being Dominic Wheatley), had an idea – or at least part of an idea. "Mark said he wanted to do a game based around football," recalls Tony, "but not an actual football game. He left it with me to think of something." It's likely that the 1990 World Cup inspired the Domark cofounder rather than the massive glut of football videogames that followed in the wake of England's 'semi'-success.

"MARK SAID HE WANTED TO DO A GAME BASED AROUND FOOTBALL"
TONY WEST

» [Mega Drive] North Sterlington's residents are inexplicably hostile to Marko.

» [Mega Drive] A crazed rat leaps to attack Marko. Look out!

CONVERSION CAPERS

HOW MARKO FARED ACROSS THE LEAGUE

MEGA DRIVE

■ With its cheerful music, colourful display and carefree style, *Marko's* lights up the Sega Mega Drive – at least visually. Unfortunately, some fiddly control issues undermine the football-as-a-weapon mechanic in places, but it's still a fun game with plenty of amusing variety.

MEGA-CD

■ Hardly released and incredibly rare as a result, Domark handed conversion duties on the CD version of *Marko's* to Interactive Studios. Vastly improved audio and amusing comic interludes aside, there's very little difference in the actual gameplay. A shame.

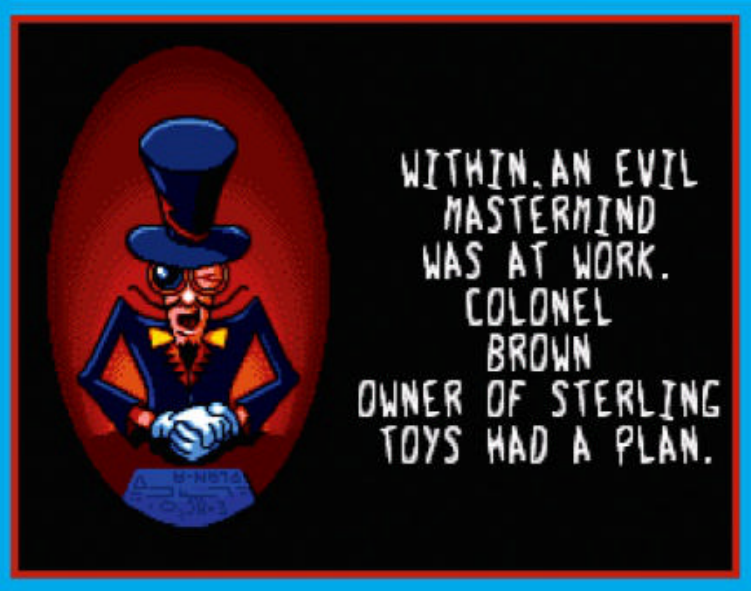
GAME GEAR

■ The view is inevitably even more zoomed-in on the Sega handheld, and the gameplay suffers as a result, not helped by the absolute age it takes for Marko's ball to return. Graphically still impressive, but comfortably the poorest iteration of the game.

SNES

■ Released a few months after the Mega Drive game, the SNES version replicates all the wonderful graphics and animations of the Sega game, including its characteristic gameplay. Something of a missed opportunity and frustrating for its developers [see Marko's Magic Trivia].

» [Mega Drive] Lose all of Marko's energy and it's back to the last save point.



» [Mega Drive] Colonel Brown hatches his evil plan.

At The Kremlin's HQ in Surrey, Tony began thinking about expanding on Mark's initial thought. "I sat down one evening, drew Marko with a football, and mocked up an alleyway scene where I envisaged him kicking his football around." Partly inspired by the cartoon *Top Cat*, Tony admits it wasn't a stretch to think of the football as a weapon the lead character could control. He showed the mock-ups to Mark Strachan, and the idea was greenlit. Marko was go.

Also working at The Kremlin was Jolyon Myers, who had made his name with the excellent arcade conversion, *Super Space Invaders*. Experienced in art, animation and sound, Jolyon also had a role in level design on *Marko's*. "I'd been used to being the sole artist working with just one programmer up until that point," he recalls. "Then, with *Marko's*, it was suddenly quite a few people involved." Having bobbled along in development for a few months, the project shifted up a gear when Warren Mills joined the team and coded the fantastic lead sprite of Marko. "Warren created the foundation for the main game," continues Jolyon, "while Michael Carr-Robb-John did a great job of looking after the main character control and ball physics, all from what Chris West had started."

It was a busy time for Domark. John Kavanagh, the freelancer who had joined The Kremlin with the Wests, moved to the main Domark offices in Putney. His replacement, Russell Ferrier, desired a more organised approach to development, bringing in Jason Orbaum and Jaid Mindang to help with the storyline and art of *Marko's*, respectively. "For the first month or two of development, Jolyon, Jaid and myself just drew ideas for the game, characters, level ideas and gameplay and created a rough storyboard," remembers Tony. The result was pages and pages of game documentation and drawings that were far in excess of what could ever be implemented, at

"WE HAD A MEETING WITH THE PROGRAMMERS WHERE IT WAS BASICALLY CONCLUDED THAT THEY COULDN'T INCLUDE HALF OF WHAT WAS DESIGNED"
TONY WEST

BATTLE OF THE BALL BOYS

IT'S THE GRUDGE MATCH TO END ALL GRUDGE MATCHES AS MARKO TAKES ON SOCCER KID. GAME ON!

GAMEPLAY MECHANICS

Mechanically both games are remarkably similar, with Kid bouncing on the ball to reach higher platforms and eliminating enemies by kicking it into them. As with *Marko's*, the ball control needs some work, and the Kid just about edges it thanks to a *California Games*-style minigame.

LEVEL DESIGN

Initially comparable, with both games starting in contemporary town areas. However, *Soccer Kid* clearly has more debt to Sega's *Sonic The Hedgehog*, with slopes and fantastical locations in its latter levels. It also includes end-of-level bosses and more varied backdrops. 2-0 to the Kid.

GRAPHICS

While *Soccer Kid*'s visuals are as cute and friendly as *Marko*'s, it's clear the attention to detail with the latter's animation is far higher. True, there's a lot more variety to *Kid*'s world, but the beauty of that flowing blonde hair hauls it back for team *Marko*. 2-1!

SOUND

Both games offer springy, bouncy, catchy tunes and rarely stray into annoying territory. However, with its sweet ball kick sound and punchy effects throughout, *Marko* edges the audio to make it an honourable draw at 2-2. [How convenient – Ed]. Now shake hands, lads.

least within a reasonable timeframe. "After a few months, we had pages of sketches and Jason had written a long story," continues Tony. "Then we had a meeting with the programmers where it was basically concluded that they couldn't include half of what was designed." So the method of operation shifted back to the old way: *Marko's* was started from scratch, made up as the team went along, and only mildly influenced by the original lengthy design document.

In a spin on the classic Roald Dahl story, *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory*, *Marko's Magic Football* centres on the eponymous young lad, up against Colonel Brown, the evil owner of a somewhat sinister toy factory. Along with his obligatory mad scientist underling, Brown has invented a deadly genetic sludge that he plans to use to turn North Sterlington's inhabitants into shambling green monsters. Meantime, while on his way to football practise, Marko accidentally kicks his ball into a dark alley, where it suddenly gains mysterious powers after rolling into a strange gooey substance. After using it to dispatch a giant rat, horribly mutated by Brown's despicable sludge, Marko sets off with his newly upgraded football, determined to discover what's going on in his town. Beginning in the streets, his journey takes him to the sewers below North Sterlington, the countryside beyond, a creepy circus and finally, Colonel Brown's toy factory. With the ball at his feet, Marko can employ a range of kicks and tricks to eliminate his enemies and solve puzzles, sort of like a cross between Sonic The Hedgehog and Gazza. There was a clear ambition at Domark for Marko to emulate the success of the former and become a mascot for the London-based publisher.

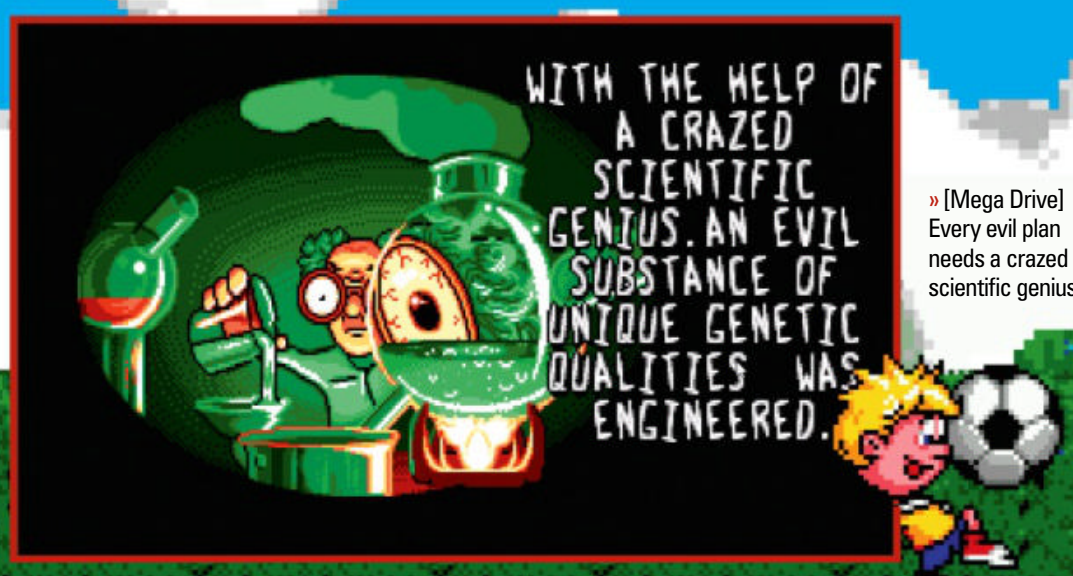
***Marko's* founding principle – the title character using a football to defeat enemies – quickly became an integral part of the game, with Michael Carr-Robb-John continuing the work started by Chris West.** "Implementing those ball physics was the first time I'd ever written any physics code," recalls Michael. "My maths has never been my strongest skill, so it took me a while to get it operational. In the end, it was fun experimenting with it, but given how close the camera is to the player, it's difficult to really appreciate the physics as the ball bounces and rolls around the landscape." Meanwhile, Jolyon Myers was having a ball [That's it, you're fired – Ed] designing and animating the game's imaginative sprites. "Every piece of art was created on an Amiga using Deluxe Paint and its great animation ability," he explains. "I'm pretty sure Tony did all his backgrounds the same way, and Paul Margrave created a tool to construct the platform levels out of the art elements Tony mainly created."

Jolyon let his imagination loose as the design team added elements on the fly. The restart points within each level

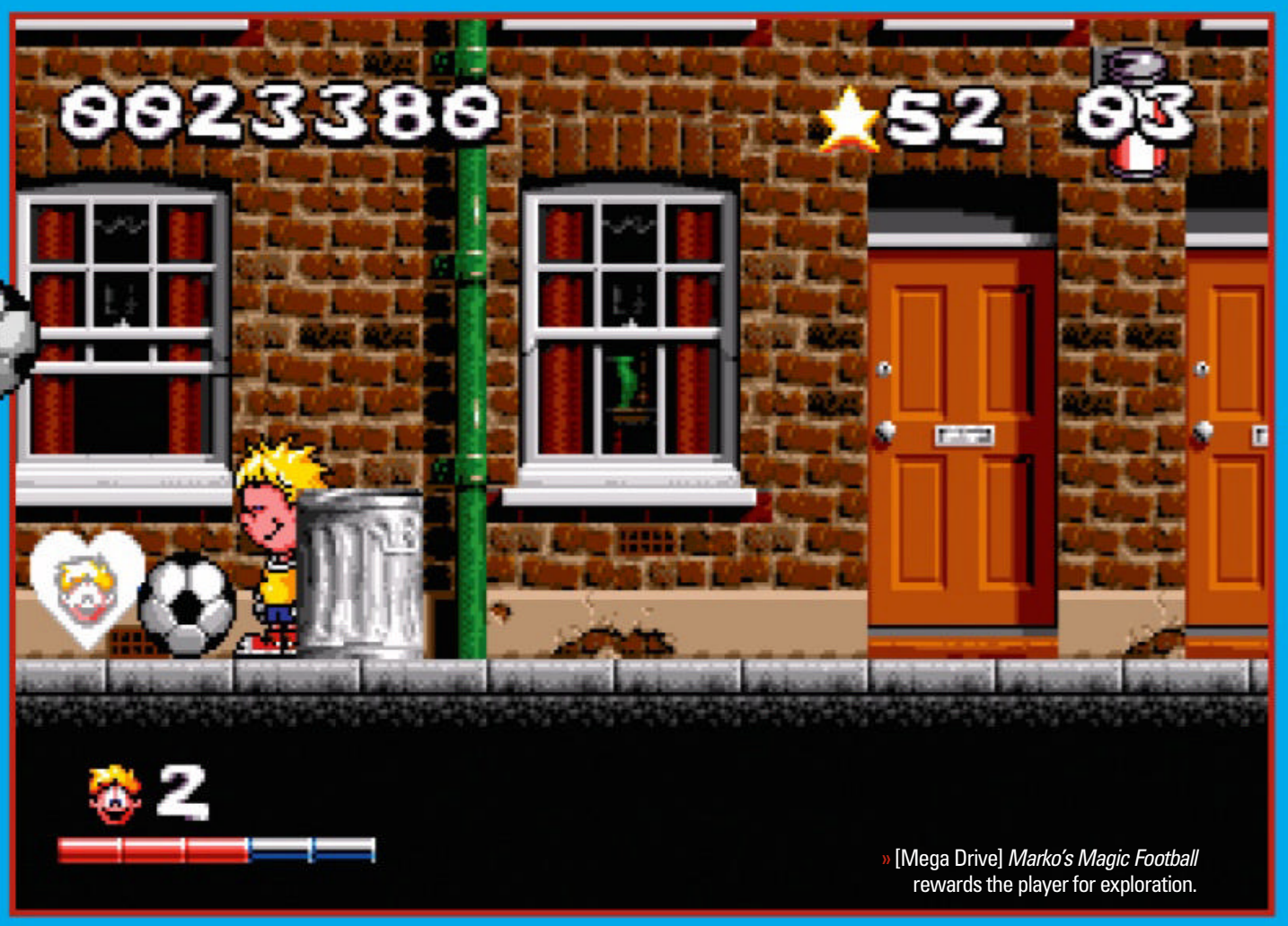
MARKO'S MAGIC TRIVIA

FUN FACTS ABOUT MARKO'S WORLD

- The *Marko's* team wanted to differentiate itself from the rest of The Kremlin. The Cartoon Mavericks was born with a snazzy intro and dual-effect Domark logo courtesy of Jolyon Myers.
- *Marko's Magic Football* became *Marko* for its US release, presumably because *Marko's Magic Soccer Ball* doesn't quite have the same ring to it.
- Radnor Road came from a road in Weybridge where a friend of Tony West's lived. He chose it as he was limited on character blocks.
- The SNES version initially had a much fuller range of ball control, including aftertouch. However, they were omitted in order to keep the game similar to the other versions.
- Jolyon Myers designed another beautifully animated Marko as he swam underwater, which was also cut from the final game.
- Most of the team forged successful careers elsewhere in the industry, such as Michael Carr-Robb-John (MicroProse) and Steve Pearce (Activision).
- Marko became one of the few non-first-party Sega characters to have their own strip in *Sonic The Comic*.
- The game's jaunty music (composed using a Roland PC and heavily orchestral) was composed by Jolyon Myers and painstakingly converted to the Mega Drive sound chip by Mike Ash.
- According to the April 1994 issue of *Sega Pro*, Krisalis briefly considered legal action against Domark for copying its concept. Nothing further was reported.



» [Mega Drive] Every evil plan needs a crazed scientific genius.



» [Mega Drive] *Marko's Magic Football* rewards the player for exploration.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

CAN YOU EMULATE MARKO'S FOOTBALL SKILLS?

KEEPY UPPY

■ Marko bounces the ball on his leg before flicking it onto his head. While generally useless in-game, this is a good way to practise ball control.

HEADING

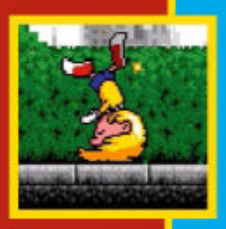
■ Birds and other flying enemies giving Marko some stick? Simply dink the magic ball onto his head, and hey presto, instant protection from above.

BALL BOUNCE

■ Not one from the manual, this. Bouncing Marko on the ball helps him jump higher and reach platforms and objects that are otherwise inaccessible.

BICYCLE KICK

■ One of Marko's most dramatic moves as he leaps into the air and fires the ball backwards, useful for any enemies sneaking up behind him.



'AVE IT

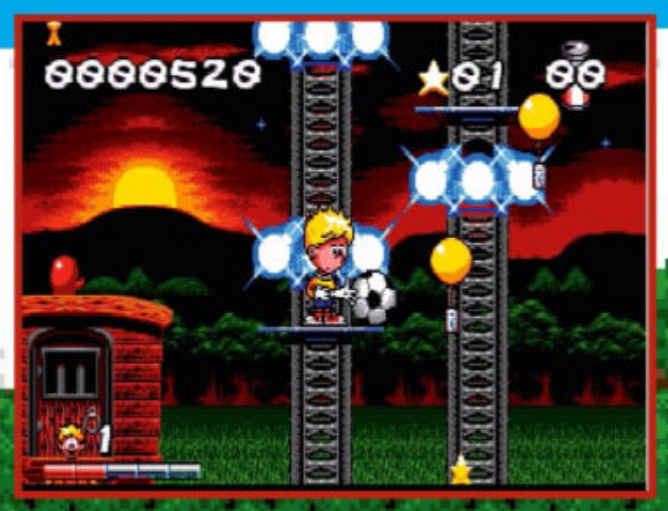
■ Finally, the classic. With a quick tap of fire and up, Marko launches his magic ball aimlessly high into the air [I'm an expert at that one – Ed].

» [Mega Drive] What a friendly-looking toy factory.

▶ became a sporty woman taking a photo of Marko as he speeds by, loosely based on a colleague within The Kremlin; policemen bounce along on pogo sticks as beautifully animated – and deadly – wildlife threatens Marko. "I tried to pay attention to animating secondary motion such as baggy clothes, hanging elements and hair," says Jolyon. "Other than Marko, the fondest for me animation-wise were some of the green sludge creatures." One such poor individual morphs into a policeman, visibly afflicted by Colonel Brown's dastardly goo.

As may be noticeable in the *Marko* story so far, the game survived a change of personnel as Tony and Chris West formed their own company, albeit with the former still working on the Domark game from afar. Having initially begun as an idea in 1990, by 1993, it was really about time *Marko* saw reality. "Warren [Mills] and Michael did a great thing," grins Jolyon, "and secured us a bonus if we finished the game within six months or so." The time limit did the trick, focussing the team on what they could realistically put in the game. "I never need encouragement to work, but that deadline was definitely a good thing!" Hugely inspired by the animation and artistic skills of Jaid Mindang, *Marko's Magic Football*'s look became its focal point in the press.

Determined to launch Marko as an unofficial Sega mascot, Domark instigated a significant promotional push for *Marko's*, including a tour that yielded unexpected benefits for one of its developers. "I did a large promotional tour with the marketing manager, visiting magazines all over Europe," reveals Jolyon, explaining his heavy presence in the game's previews. "I was interviewed for a regional Scottish entertainment show called *Megamag* – the director of the gaming segment, and my interviewer,



would eventually become, and still is, my wife, so I have *Marko* and everyone involved to thank for that!"

While rumours circulated about the leaking of game ideas, it wasn't until near the end of development on *Marko's* that its team became aware of a remarkably similar concept from Krisalis Software on the Commodore Amiga called *Soccer Kid*. "It didn't really affect us," remembers Tony. "I knew we had an original idea. We had our suspicions, maybe it was just mentioned in passing, or perhaps two teams came up with the exact same idea at the exact same time – you decide." Released in October of 1993, it was fun for gamers to compare the two ball-based platform games [see Battle Of The Ball Boys], although not so entertaining for the *Marko* team. "Visually, it looked very different to our game," notes Jolyon, "but obviously the basic idea of a platformer combined with football was always going to form into something comparable." Released on Mega-CD, Game Gear and SNES, across all its formats, there's no doubt that *Marko's Magic Football* looked the part; sadly, the reception to its gameplay wasn't quite as enthusiastic. "A lovely looking effort from Domark," noted *Mean Machines* of the Mega Drive game in its June 1994 issue. "But one that falls down on the fun stakes because of unnecessary repetition."

» [Mega Drive] The obligatory sewer level. Look out for rats!

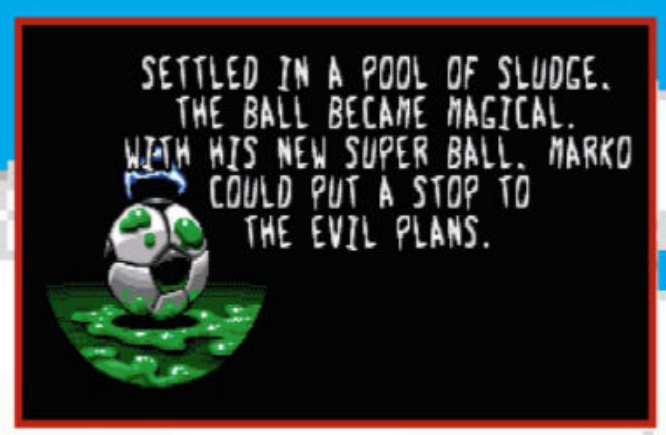
» [Mega Drive] Unique and charming characters appear throughout *Marko's Magic Football*.

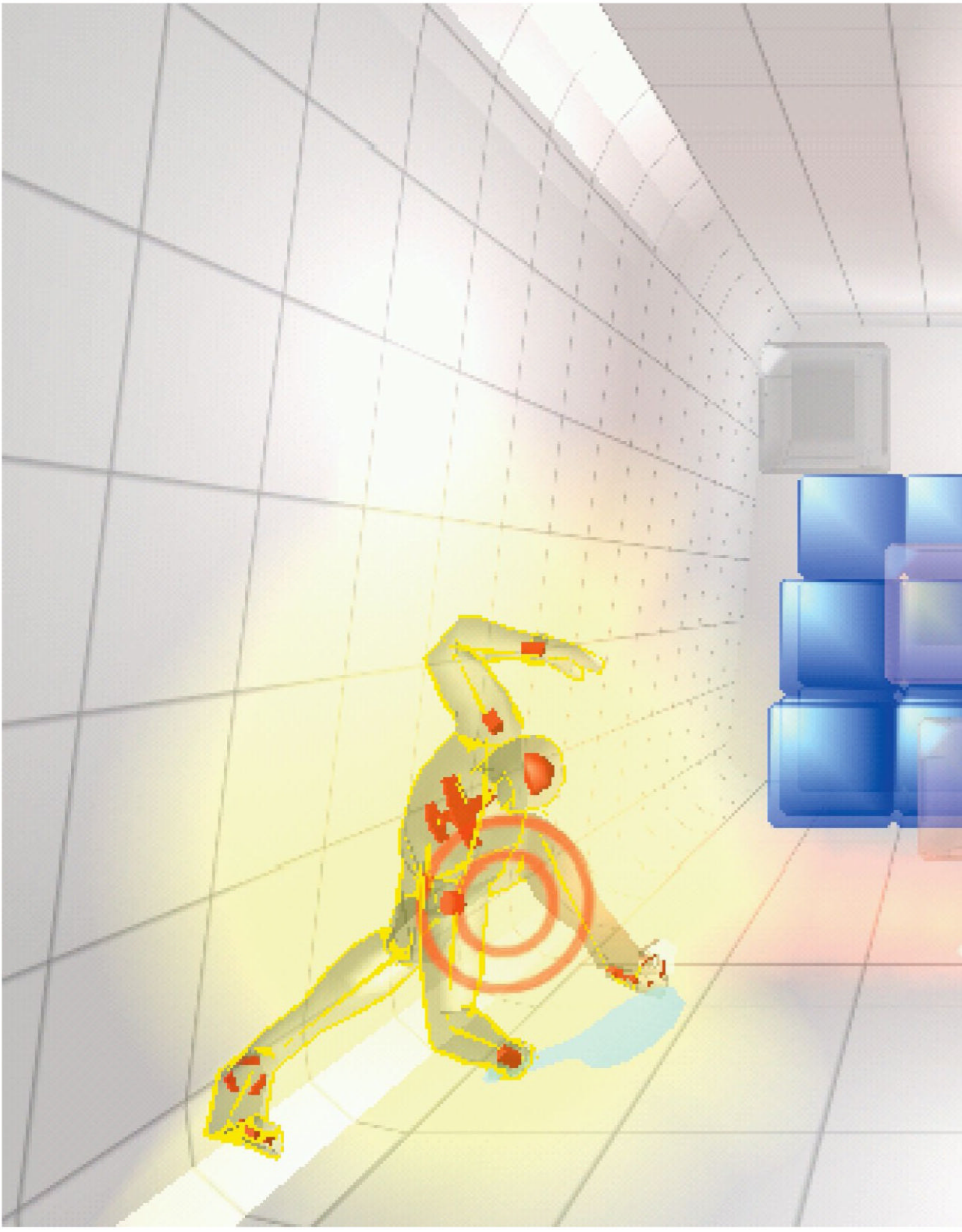
Despite its sleek graphical style, that central hook and the gameplay around it disappoints its developers today. "I would say we achieved our goal of bringing a richly animated character to life," notes Michael. "Today, however, 29 years of game development later, I would say it was a hard game, and there are a lot of things we could do differently if we were making the game today." Tony West, who continued to work on *Marko's* while also developing *Street Racer* for Vivid Image, recalls, "I don't think the ball mechanics were exploited as well as they could have been – in my opinion, the game was crazy hard! I was never really happy with some of the levels visually, but there was no time to redo anything, so you had to stick with what you had." Looking back, Michael Carr-Robb-John agrees. "There are many things I would do differently now. Off the top of my head, more animations to speed up *Marko's* reactions, allowing for quicker transitions and a more responsive character. Maybe pull the camera back a bit, so the player could see more of the world around them and add some element of auto-aiming for the ball kicks to give the player a feeling that they really are a master football player."

Perhaps without the self-imposed bonus-inspired time limit, *Marko's Magic Football* would have benefitted from such improvements; but with 1994 and the Sony PlayStation looming, it was most likely the wiser decision to ensure the game got to market as soon as possible. Gameplay flaws aside, it remains a beautifully unique-looking game, especially its football-loving star. "I loved animating Marko," concludes Jolyon. "Tony's design was really cute, and I really made those flowing locks go for it. [He] was an inspiration and made me want to improve my pixel art skills. It helped that there was so much to draw from, from when the game was in its initial wild design phase." And while it informed much of *Marko's* eventual look, it was that eventful first burst of design fever that perhaps jinxed *Marko's*. "I learned [developing *Marko's*] that it was a complete waste of time spending months trying to plan every aspect of a game before you write even one bit of code," notes Tony. "Now? I'd develop the main game mechanics and build a game around them."

With most of *Marko's* team young and inexperienced, its development proved a steep learning curve. So, while the game's star may not have become the global mascot its publisher was hoping for, he at least helped forge many notable careers within the videogames industry. Now that's magic.

"THERE ARE MANY THINGS I WOULD DO DIFFERENTLY NOW"
MICHAEL CARR-ROBB-JOHN





Cosmic Smash

BALLS TO THE WALL

RETROREVIVAL

» DREAMCAST » 2001 » SEGA ROSSO

I've written before about the time I used to spend wandering around the local sports centre after my karate classes finished. Beyond the arcade games I played and the occasional volleyball lesson, another thing I commonly did was watch people playing squash, mostly because the courts were so close to the dojo that the occasional loose ball flew in during lessons. Unfortunately, squash isn't a sport with a particularly distinguished history of videogames, but Sega did use it as the basis for an interesting 3D *Breakout* variant.

The goal of *Cosmic Smash* is quite simple – wallop that ball into the blocks at the far end of the court, and keep doing it until they're all gone. There are occasionally unbreakable blocks that will impede you, but other than them your only real enemy is the time limit as there's no lives system. If you want to score well, you'll need to finish stages quickly, avoid missing the ball and try to finish stages with trick shots – the more spectacular, the better. This seems easy at first as trick shots can smash through blocks rather than bouncing off them, but you'll soon realise that they take precious seconds off your timer, and every borderline shot is an inducement to risky play.

Of course, the whole point of this is to encourage players to approach *Cosmic Smash* with the same sense of stylistic flair that the artists and musicians did. The decades since its release have done nothing to dull the game's retro-futuristic beauty, which even extends to some unique packaging in which the disc serves as part of the cover art. It's probably no surprise to you that a Japanese exclusive Dreamcast game with a distinctive look sells for a high price these days, and many gamers will baulk at its lack of content, but high-score chasers and speedrunners are likely to find plenty of replay value in its arcade action.

THE MAKING OF SIM COPTER

FLY AROUND THE DANGEROUS STREETS OF SIMCITY (OR YOUR VERY OWN SIMCITY 2000 MAPS), ARRESTING CRIMINALS, DOUSING FIRES AND RESOLVING TRAFFIC JAMS. IT'S ALL IN A DAY'S WORK FOR A HELICOPTER PILOT IN SIMCOPER, WILL WRIGHT'S FINAL ENTRY IN THE ORIGINAL SIM SERIES

WORDS BY DAMIANO GERLI

» [PC] Get away from there, there's a sick man who needs help!

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** MAXIS
- **DEVELOPER:** MAXIS
- **RELEASED:** 1996
- **PLATFORM:** PC
- **GENRE:** SIMULATION

Will Wright just wanted to be left alone to finish *The Sims*. The developer had been working for four years on a life simulation, ever since shipping *SimAnt* in 1992. But, alas, after the huge success of *SimCity 2000*, Maxis had been struggling to come up with an identity for its series of *Sim* titles. In 1996, the company was not doing well financially and desperately needed some of that Wright magic. The developer mentions how, at that time, he had been keeping busy on three different projects, one of which was going to be *The Sims*, the third being a smaller game which Maxis asked him to complete in time for Christmas, *SimCopter*. The idea behind the game was that the player would be flying around in a helicopter in *SimCity 2000* maps solving issues such as fires, transporting sick people to the hospital and arresting criminals.

Ocean Quigley, lead artist, remembers that back in the mid-Nineties Maxis was still quite an experimental company. "I think it was mainly about figuring out what was going to happen to the company after the blockbuster success of *SimCity 2000*, mainly trying not to go out of business! Maxis was super-creative, but quite chaotic." John Lewis, who worked on the 3D engine for the Mac version of the game, mentions being at Maxis for a few years by the time *SimCopter* was started. "Originally, I was hired to write *SimTown* which I commonly describe as the kids' version of *SimCity* or as a *SimMrRogersNeighborhood*." Jason Shankel, who worked on translating maps from *SimCity* to the 3D engine, had started working at Maxis around 1994, keeping busy with the network code in *SimCity 2000*. Jason mentions how *SimCopter* was born mainly out of Will Wright's love for helicopters, "He paid a lot of attention to the flight model to make sure the simulation felt right and provided lots of useful feedback, but it did feel like his heart was more invested in his two other projects."

The first issue was trying to find a suitable 3D engine, since at the time the company

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

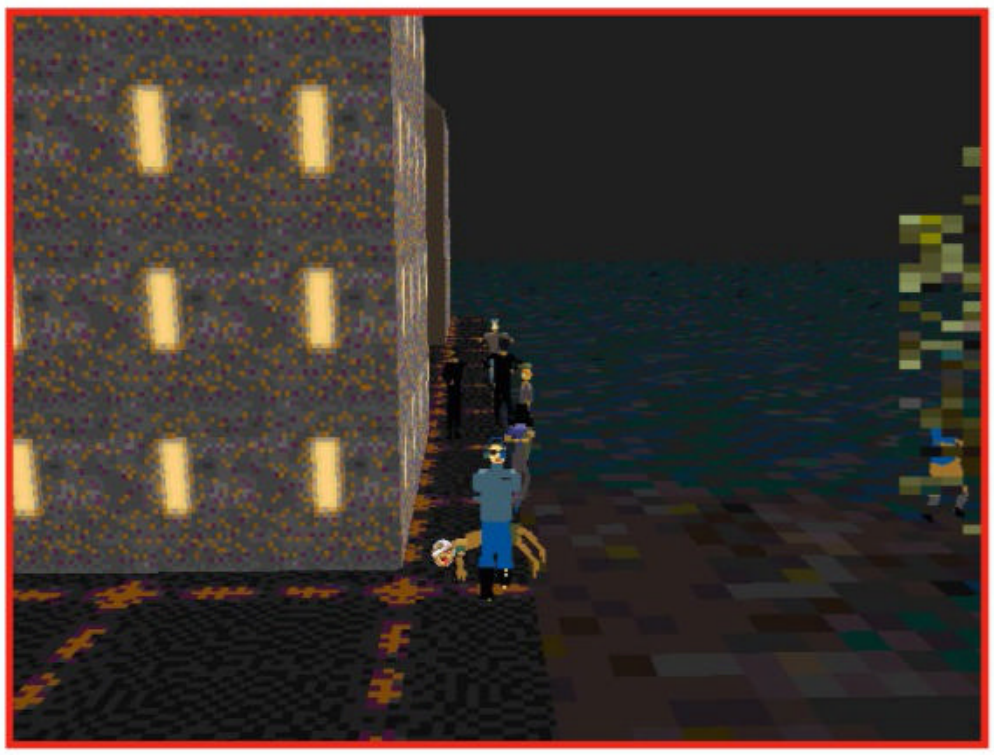
SIMCITY
SYSTEM: PC, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1989

SIMCITY 2000 (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: PC, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1993

THE SIMS
SYSTEM: PC, VARIOUS
YEAR: 2000

» [PC] The medic is handling the sick guy, all is well.

» [PC] Which one should I be flying today?



» [PC] It is possible to call an ambulance, but our pilot can also expertly carry the sick to the helicopter.

» [PC] It is always foggy in *SimCopter* city.

» [PC] Strike! I'm out!

THE ORIGINS OF SIMCOPTER

THE HELICOPTER GAME THAT EVENTUALLY LED TO SIMCOPTER

■ Will Wright had always been fascinated by flight models and helicopters, so for his first game, he developed a shoot-'em-up with a helicopter. It was originally released in 1984 on Commodore 64, with a later conversion to the NES. Wright mentions having the time of his life designing the whole map (the nation of Bungeling) the player would fly around in, while being quite less interested in designing the action mechanics. Despite this, *Raid* featured many interesting mechanics for the time, especially in how the Bungeling's war industry worked according to a hierarchy. If the player left the factories alone, they would slowly build a superweapon which, if complete, would spell game over. The player had to hurry in crippling their war industry (by bombing factories first), only then, could they concentrate on destroying single threats like warships and helicopters. Despite Wright describing it, recently, as a "mediocre title", *Raid On Bungeling Bay* was one of the most unique shoot-'em-ups of the era, and would also inspire the developer to design a city simulator using the same engine: *SimCity*.

JASON SHANKEL

■ Jason worked on *SimCopter*'s engine. After *Streets Of SimCity*, he would later follow Will Wright at Syntertainment. He also worked as a senior software engineer on *Roblox*.

OCEAN QUIGLEY

■ Ocean worked as lead artist on *SimCopter* and also on other Maxis titles like *The Sims* and *SimCity 4*. He is now a creative director at Facebook, in charge of 3D photos and posts.

apparently did not have the skill to develop one in-house. Developer Micheal Larson, who worked on the engine, says, "3D engines required some level of specialised knowledge. Maxis weren't prepared to find and hire what was needed, also the requirement to support the Mac made their problem harder." Jason recalls the engine for *SimCopter* was provided by an external company from Utah called Mindwarp, and only used software rendering, since there was just no market for 3D accelerators at the time. Apparently, the engine was far from being ideal, "It used a lot of 'cheats' to make things simpler. One of the common techniques was to have distant objects get obscured by fog."

> "SINCE IT WAS MAINLY BASED ON IMPORTING CITIES DEVELOPED IN SIMCITY, IT DIDN'T NEED MUCH OF A GAME ENGINE TO HANDLE THE REST OF THE GAMEPLAY"
> **JOHN LEWIS**

Ocean recalls how model trains were the main inspiration for designing *SimCopter*, in how the various graphical elements were rendered while trying to prioritise visibility. "We had to cleanly represent discrete game objects and we had to turn them into readable symbolic representations of whatever they were, so that they could be understood at a glance". The art team had to prioritise visibility over sensible artistic choices, so that would explain the infamous blue dogs that can be observed while flying around.

The work on *SimCopter* was divided between several teams, each with their own task, such as making the simple 3D graphical engine work on the limited power of home PCs of the time. As time was essential, many of the former developers mention the development cycle for *SimCopter* being quite brief, less than nine months: nailing the holiday release was quite the important objective. "One thing that everyone learned right away about the gaming industry: you don't want to miss CES… and Christmas," John comments. "Since it was mainly based on importing cities developed in *SimCity*, it didn't need that much of a game engine to handle the rest of the gameplay." Jason mentions how, "The resolution wasn't really up to display finer things, so that there were many challenges in keeping things clear for the player."

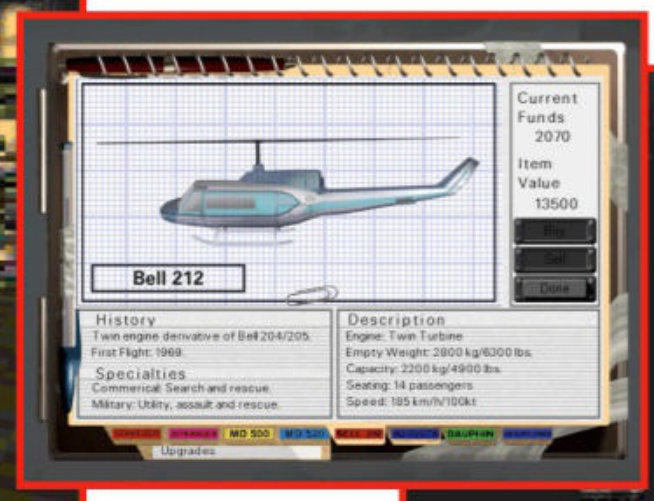
MICHAEL LARSON

■ Michael worked on several aspects of the *SimCopter* engine and also provided work on early versions of *The Sims*. He is now a software engineer at Ciena.

JOHN LEWIS

■ John rewrote several aspects of the 3D engine of *SimCopter* to make it run faster, along with being the lead programmer for *SimTown*. He is now the chief hardware Engineer of data security at Utimaco.

» [PC] One of the infamous… unique dogs of *SimCopter*.



» [PC] You can definitely feel Wright's passion in the helicopter selection.

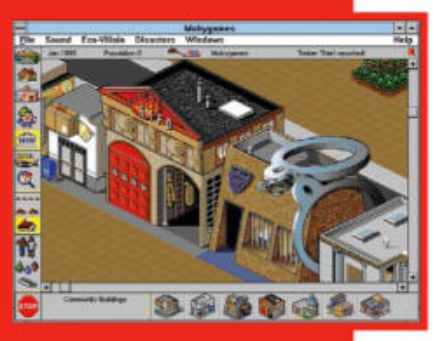
» [PC] At night it's easier to hide the fog.

SIM-ILAR GAMES

OTHER GAMES IN THE SIM SERIES

SIMTOWN

■ A simplified version of the classic *SimCity* game aimed at a younger audience. With a more kid-friendly interface and an overall lower difficulty, *SimTown* allows younger players to build their completely functional towns, with roads, residences and shops, while listening to the citizens' advice.

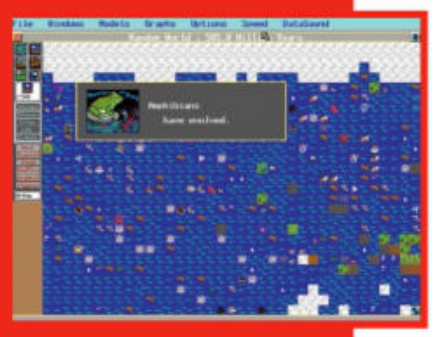


SIMGOLF

■ This was Maxis' failed attempt at trying to create its own line of sport games. *SimGolf* lets you control the swing of the stroke while using only the mouse. It also features a comprehensive course editor which gives players the chance to create their very own holes.

SIMEARTH

■ Expanding the *SimCity* idea to its natural limits, *SimEarth* puts the players in charge of the entire planet, guiding the inhabitants from being unicellular beings to travelling towards the stars. Interacting with the planet is done by creating new living beings, moving around mountains and seas and also using disasters to level the field.



SIMTOWER

■ *SimTower*'s original idea, that of building vertically rather than horizontally, originally came from a Japanese team which worked with Maxis. The player's goal is that of building a skyscraper that is both aesthetically pleasing and economical. It is also possible to interact, limitedly, with some of the Sims.

THE SIMS

■ Will Wright's long-managed project ended up being one of Maxis' biggest titles ever. The focus moved from managing a city, to managing the lives of a single family (or even an individual) while going through their daily lives. It found great success and created a whole series that's still going strong today with a fourth title and a fifth currently in the works.

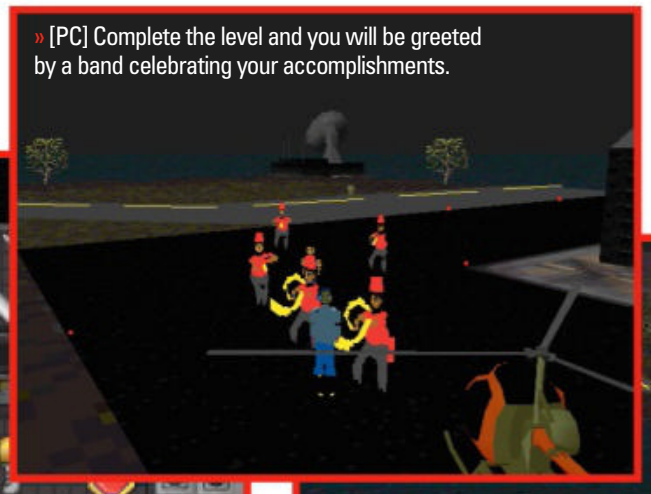
> "SIMLISH ALLOWS THE PLAYER TO PROJECT MORE OF THE DRAMA THEMSELVES"
> **JASON SHANKEL**

▶ Micheal remembers that one of Will Wright's other projects was a hybrid adventure/flight simulator in 3D. John confirms the project, saying, "I did work with Will Wright and his prototype game, it was one of his dream projects. It was supposed to be a hybrid between a *Myst*-like adventure and a 3D simulation of the Hindenburg disaster, a fully functional blimp the player could interact with. Basically, you were onboard and had to try to solve the mystery. I don't remember exactly why it didn't get the final go-ahead."

According to an interview with Wright, he mentions deciding to shelve the game because the Hindenburg incident was still too closely connected with Nazism and he feared that would cripple the game's marketability. Aside from being both fuelled by Wright's love for planes and helicopters, *SimCopter* apparently does not share any of the engine code with that shelved prototype.

***SimCopter* was also the first time that the language of the Sims made its debut, even though it wasn't yet named, it would be later known as Simlish.** *SimCopter* confused things a bit, since the helicopter pilot spoke English but only when using the megaphone, he would revert back to Simlish while interacting with other people on the streets. "They pioneered

» [PC] Complete the level and you will be greeted by a band celebrating your accomplishments.



» [PC] The criminal won't stop but the police are hot on his trail.

» [PC] Who did this?! It couldn't have been a rogue helicopter, right?

the language in *SimCopter* as that also saved a bit of time and space so we did not have to record hundreds of different lines," says Jason. "Simlish allows the player to project more of the drama for themselves, sensing the general emotional state the Sims are feeling."

With development on *SimCopter* coming to an end towards November, Maxis nailed the Christmas release and the game was met with overall positive reviews. All seemed to be going well, until one particular incident forced the company to recall all of the shipped copies. The original release of *SimCopter* contained what would be known as 'the gay Easter egg': randomly, on some days of the week, the game would spawn several topless men running around kissing each other. It was later revealed that the Easter egg was put in as a rebellious act against the company by developer Jacques Servin. Micheal laughs while recalling the incident, "I met the developer, I think his motivation was just boredom, he was something of a rights activist (which I totally support), and Maxis had a bit of a buttoned-up culture. He went on to other kinds of spoofs/activities that got even more publicity. I thought it was harmless and funny – but that wasn't the reaction from corporate." Jason adds, "Wright also was a bit of a prankster, so I thought the Easter egg shared that kind of spirit, but that ended up leaving the company exposed. Jacques failed to clear his idea with corporate, deciding instead to hide the Easter egg, and that backfired. It really is a mild thing seeing it today, but at the time Maxis was very concerned about unauthorised content that could affect sales." While having to recall all copies of the just-released game was indeed a big deal for the company, in the end, the incident did not seem to majorly affect the overall weak sales of *SimCopter*.

> "ALL OF THESE ANCILLARY TITLES AFTER SIMCITY NEVER PRODUCED MUCH IN THE WAY OF REVENUE"
> **MICHAEL LARSON**

Micheal recalls that the low sales of *SimCopter* were no surprise since, "All of these ancillary titles, about trying to build a franchise around building or designing something, never produced much in the way of revenue, outside of new versions of *SimCity*." Jason would end up enhancing the *SimCopter* engine, making it compatible with 3D accelerators for *Streets Of SimCity*, a similar idea to *SimCopter* but with a prototype *Grand Theft Auto* gameplay. "It was different from *Copter*, it was not anymore about random events, we had a scripted set of levels with things that could happen and the player could also design their own maps to drive around in. But the technology still wasn't there, 3D acceleration in 1997 was still not a thing so performance took a huge hit and we got review bombed for it." The 3D version of *SimCity* that Maxis had developed for *SimCopter* and *Streets Of SimCity*, ended up forming the backbone of the original 3D version of *SimCity 3000*, at least until the company was bought out by Electronic Arts, which insisted on a 2D version.

"It was really Electronic Arts which came in and rectified things," Jason says. "I remember their surprise that Maxis hadn't yet released a sequel to their smash hit, *SimCity 2000*. In the end, they put all resources behind *3000*, scrapping the 3D version that was in development and focussing on updating the original *2000* version. There was no talk of following up *SimCopter*, since all resources were shifted to *SimCity* and *The Sims*, they just decided to skip anything that was still connected to *2000*. A game I had been working on, *SimMars*, a terraforming Mars simulator, was also cancelled."

Most of the developers also mention how the managers at Maxis weren't really up to the task of trying to keep the company afloat during *SimCopter*'s release. "I don't think that *The Sims* (or even *SimCity 3000*) would have shipped if Electronic Arts, and people like Lucy Bradshaw and Luc Barthelet, hadn't come in and gotten things organised," admits Ocean. While *SimCopter* did not change the fate of Maxis, it remains a unique title in the *Sim* series to this day, especially in how it gave players a first taste of what was to come, later, in the smash hit *The Sims*.

Classic Controller fact

■ The Classic Controller has two rear slots for clipping an attachment to. Nintendo never used this feature of the pad, but it was intended to provide a way of attaching a standard Wii controller.

ESSENTIAL GAME

TATSUNOKO VS CAPCOM: ULTIMATE ALL STARS

Even though it's not the first console that comes to mind when fighting games are mentioned, the Wii does have some and its standard controller is particularly ill-suited to the genre – even when held horizontally, it's a two-button device in a world that demands four or six. Fortunately, the Classic Controller makes the system's scrappers considerably more enjoyable, and this Capcom crossover is one of the best of the bunch. Tatsunoko's characters may be obscure outside of Japan, but the tag team fighting action is worth checking out regardless.

Classic Controller

» PLATFORM: Wii **» YEAR:** 2006 **» COST:** £14 (launch), £10+ (today, boxed), £5+ (today, unboxed)

Though Nintendo hoped that the motion controls and friendly TV remote styling of the Wii's primary controller would reverse years of decline in its home console business, it wasn't ignorant to the need for a more traditional option. The company was planning to sell plenty of Virtual Console games after all, and all of those were designed for regular game pads. To ensure that its bases were covered, Nintendo introduced the Classic Controller.

The design elaborates on the template set by the SNES controller, with the addition of two analogue sticks and a second, small pair of digital shoulder buttons. The L and R buttons also have analogue functionality. One quirk of the Classic Controller is that it cannot function independently, and must be connected to a regular Wii controller for power and wireless communication with the console. This didn't impede the popularity of the device, as the Classic Controller is supported by over 200 original games across retail and WiiWare, as well as the full Virtual Console library. *

SUPPLIED BY
EVAN AMOS

CHRIS LANCASTER

From converting Matthew Smith's masterworks to the Commodore 64 to coding the 'other' Sheep In Space, Chris Lancaster tells us about his short but eventful time in the games business

Words by Paul Drury

Many boys grow up dreaming of joining the Royal Air Force and flying fighter jets over enemy territory. For Chris Lancaster, half of that was true. "My main interest growing up was electronics and I knew the RAF provided some of the best training for a career in electronics," he explains, "I had absolutely no interest in aircraft at all! I joined in January 1977 and in 1980, I applied for a posting to Sealand, which nobody ever did because it was a maintenance unit and everyone wanted to work on aircraft. So I got it!" The base's proximity to Liverpool, tied to his growing interest in the emerging world of home computers, led to him writing games for some of the major software houses of the day – and working with some of the biggest names.

» Chris still owns the C64 he was given in part payment for *Bewitched*. His attic is full of treasures.

Hello Chris… or is it Kris? Both names appear on the C64 *Manic Miner* title screen. Have you an evil twin?
[Laughs] No, that's because my ex-wife was called Christine and if you remember in the Eighties, sun strips with names on were very popular on car windscreens. Rather than have Chris and Chris we changed her name to Kris.

Was she involved in converting *Manic Miner*?
She was! There was no easy way I knew of getting the character data from the Spectrum to the C64 so she read out piles of numbers and I typed them in.

You also used the pseudonym Stan Clear on the title screen of your final game, *Boing*. Why?
That's an anagram of Lancaster, my surname, and that was because of the upset with Software Projects. After I'd done the *Manic Miner* conversion, they asked me to do the Commodore 64 version of *Jet Set Willy*. They wanted it done for some show in America they were attending but I told them it wasn't ready. I had a problem getting the rope swinging properly and I wasn't happy with it going out in the state it was. They said nothing at that point… and just got someone else to do it secretly in the background.

The main baddie in *Boing* is called Ron Bammotty, which is an anagram of Software Projects' boss Tommy Barton. Is he the man who was demanding that you deliver *Jet Set Willy* immediately?
Yes, that was Tommy, the unscrupulous man with the money at Software Projects. He'd say jump and everyone asked, "How high?" He had the cash and wanted his own way.

You worked for Software Projects and before that for Imagine Software, when Liverpool was at the centre of the burgeoning British software industry…
Let me correct you – I never actually worked for anyone. I was totally independent but yes, I could see Imagine were pushing things forward, putting out loads of games for lots of different computers, and Bug Byte were in the area, too. The whole lot were in Liverpool, even the main tape duplicators! I was born in Pontefract, which was definitely not the centre of the software scene, but I just happened to have been posted to RAF Sealand, which is near to Chester and not too far from Liverpool.

Liverpool in the early Eighties was pretty bleak – mass unemployment, deprivation and riots.
I remember during the very early days of Software Projects, before they'd even released a game, they took over the Bear Brand Complex, these buildings pretty close to Toxteth. I used to go over fairly regularly on a Saturday morning and a few days after they'd been rioting there, Tommy Barton asked me and Alan Maton [cofounder of Software Projects] if we wanted to take his car for a spin? He threw us the keys and when we got outside, we realised he had a Rolls Royce. Two scruffy blokes in jeans driving round Toxteth. You could see the look on the policemen's faces. I'm surprised they didn't stop us…

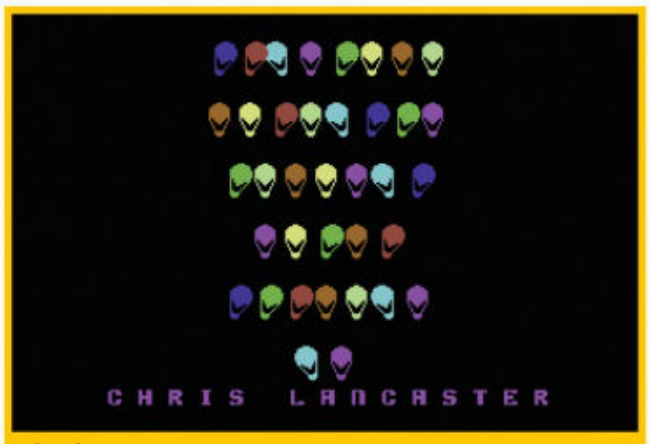
Living the dream, Chris. Were you an early adopter of home micros?
I bought a ZX81 as soon as they came out, but two weeks later I sold it for a £20 loss, much to my wife's disgust. In that fortnight, I'd done as much as I thought I could with it and

> The Imagine offices were littered with bits of computers. They were using Spectrums as doorstops
>
> Chris Lancaster

SELECTED TIMELINE

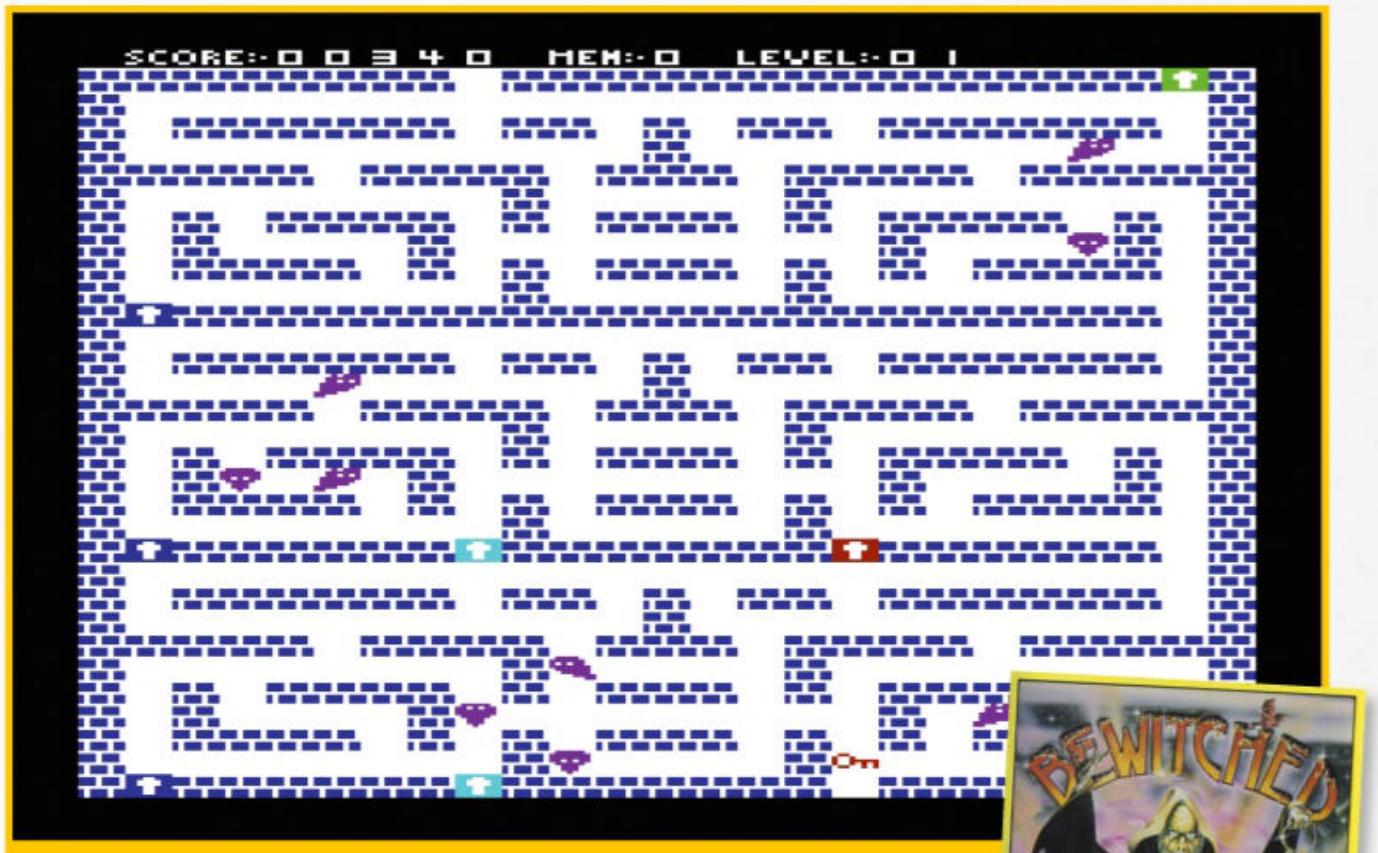
- **BEWITCHED** [VIC-20] 1983
- **CRAZY BALLOON** [C64] 1983
- **MANIC MINER** [C64] 1983
- **SHEEP IN SPACE** [C64] 1984 (UNRELEASED)
- **JET SET WILLY** [C64] 1984 (UNRELEASED)
- **BOING** [C64] 1986

» [VIC-20] *Bewitched* is a tricky game until you work out that the ghosts never go straight across a junction. Knowledge is the bomb.



» [C64] The title screen of *Crazy Balloon* uses numerous interrupts to display 37 sprites on screen, an enduring source of pride for Chris.

» [C64] This clown may be smiling but he hasn't got to guide a fragile balloon round spiky mazes against the clock.



» [VIC-20] If you get to level 10, you'll be faced with 27 ghosts on screen to dodge. Good luck with that.

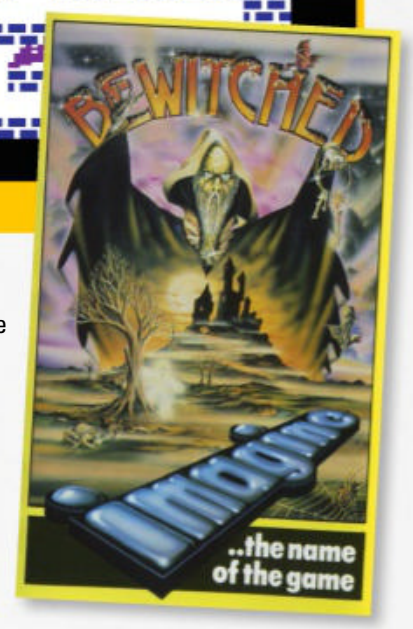
needed something bigger. The VIC-20 was on the horizon and it had more memory… and a proper keyboard!

Your first game for the VIC-20 was *Bewitched* in 1983 and it reminds us of the arcade game *Cavelon*, released the same year. Was that an inspiration?
I did go to arcades but I never saw that game. I was just interested in the mechanics of how computers worked. Once I'd bought a VIC-20, I enrolled on a 6502 programming course through the RAF but it was delayed and by the time it started, I knew more than the instructor. He didn't have a clue about the difference between indexed indirect addressing and indirect indexed addressing.

Erm, us neither. It sounds like you were programming in machine code not BASIC?
Yes, raw machine code. I'd gone through BASIC coding in a few weeks and could see it needed to be faster.

***Bewitched* has a lot going on for an unexpanded VIC-20 game.**
That's where Imagine Software came in. They were nearby and I liked that their games ran on a standard computer, without any expansion required. Some of my friends had come round and played *Bewitched* and said it was really good and that I should be selling it, so I walked in to Imagine to show them what I'd done.

A ballsy move, Chris! What was the place like?
The offices were littered with bits of computers. I remember seeing a Spectrum wedged under a door as a doorstop. There was a bunch of people sitting around, eating sandwiches and playing games on computers. I said I'd got a game to show them and the reply was, "You need to see Eugene Evans but he's out for lunch." I said I'd wait and loaded up *Bewitched*… and they started playing it and were impressed! Someone managed to get to the bottom of the screen and discovered when you go through a door the whole screen scrolls up a bit and you have more ghosts. By the time you get to maze ten, the last level, there are 27 ghosts on the screen and it's pretty hectic!



» We love the tape inlays of the early Imagine releases, especially when they bear little relation to the game itself.

What happened when Eugene Evans returned from lunch?
He had a look and said, "No, it's no good, we only take games for unexpanded computers." He must have assumed it was using a RAM pack because there was so much happening on-screen and also, I think *Bewitched* was the first VIC-20 game to get rid of the borders and use an expanded screen. I said it wasn't [using any additional RAM] but he physically checked round the back of the machine in case I was lying [laughs]. Then he checked the wire from the monitor to the computer to see if something dodgy was going on…

When Eugene realised it really was running on an unexpanded VIC-20, did he make you an offer straight away?
We had a quick discussion and I walked out with £2,500, a C64 and a 1541 disk drive. They bought the game outright as I didn't trust anyone to pay royalties back then. The one condition was that I added in joystick controls as it only used the keyboard. I'd experimented with joystick controls and thought they weren't fast enough and

actually, the first review of *Bewitched* said, "Unplayable with a joystick, use the keys" [laughs].

> "I thought about buying a Porsche but got a Metro instead. It was a Turbo, at least"
> Chris Lancaster

Eugene Evans was lauded in the press as this whizz-kid programmer. Was that your impression of him?
No. I think he was pushed into [that role] because of his age and they could make this whole 'teenage superstar' story up. He was OK as a programmer, don't get me wrong, but his knowledge was fairly basic. As was mine at the time. We were all new to it. I remember talking to Eugene about the flickering sprites on the C64 version of *Arcadia* and he said, "There's nothing you can do about that. If you have more than eight sprites, they'll flicker." That lodged in the back of my mind. I could see there were ways to get round it and that's how *Crazy Balloon* started.

You got straight to work on the C64 you'd just been given, then?
I wanted to know how this new machine worked. I spotted something in one of the programming books that said you could find out exactly where the TV was scanning, then create an interrupt that moved all the sprites to a new position but they are still visible in their old position. And with no flickering!

» Chris bought himself an SX64 so he could continue coding during long weekends visiting family. He still has his original development disks too.

Imagine. What happened there?
After Imagine had bought *Bewitched*, I never heard anything else from them, so I didn't bother showing them *Crazy Balloon*. In fact, there's a little dig at Eugene Evans on the title screen, which displays 37 balloons, all sprites, with no flickering, just using a series of interrupts [laughs]. Software Projects didn't exist at this point, so I took it to Bug Byte Software and left it with them but after a couple of weeks, I'd had very little feedback. Then I got a call from Alan Maton. He said he'd been chatting to one of his old colleagues at Bug Byte and understood they were messing me about so how did I fancy selling my game to a new software house he was setting up as their first release?

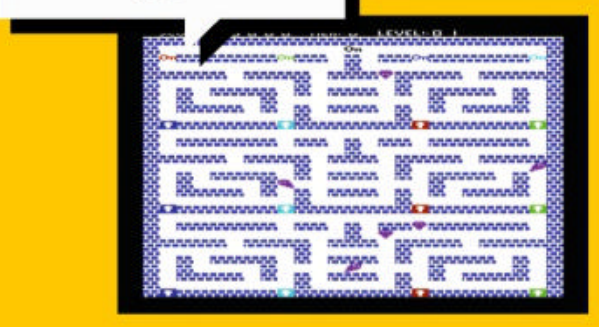
That sounds like a great opportunity but also a risk?
I went over and talked to Alan and his wife, Soo, and they said they'd take *Crazy Balloon* and pay me royalties of 60p a copy. I thought I'd take a chance. I liked that they had a proper artist doing the covers plus they said they were releasing *Manic Miner*. I was a bit confused but they explained Matthew Smith had written his own contract with Bug Byte and he had the option of giving them four weeks' notice and then taking the game back. And he did.

Did you consider joining Software Projects as an in-house programmer?

***Crazy Balloon* was released in 1983 but by Software Projects, not**

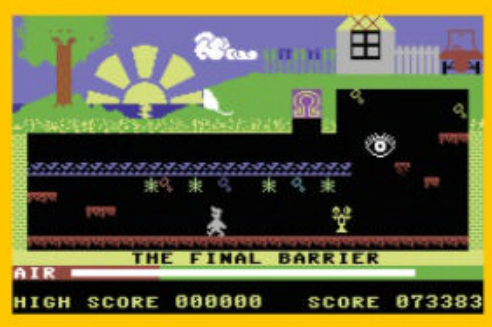
FOUR TO PLAY

The released games of Chris Lancaster



BEWITCHED
■ Chris' debut was an interesting twist on the maze game formula, requiring you to change the colour of your key to unlock one of four doors and access the next section of the maze. A growing number of ghosts make your task increasingly difficult and for an unexpanded VIC-20 game, it offers a stern challenge.

CRAZY BALLOON
■ 'Inspired' by Taito's coin-op from 1980, Chris created 26 new levels and added bonuses to collect, floating enemies to avoid and magnets which pull you off course. Guiding your swaying balloon through tight turns requires patience and practise and working out the best route to maximise your score offers much replay value.



MANIC MINER
■ Chris coded his impressive conversion of Matthew Smith's much-loved platformer in just five-and-a-half weeks, fuelled only by Dr Pepper, he assures us. It's very faithful to the original, though ever the perfectionist, Chris still gets upset by the white line that occasionally flickers into view on the final screen.

BOING
■ Chris' final release feels like a missed opportunity. Using the code from his unreleased conversion of *Jet Set Willy*, he adds in parachutes to collect which can prevent fatal falls and heaps of collectibles, but the lack of varied enemies, only giving you one life and the elongated death sequence make it too frustrating to be fun.

» [C64] Chris met Eugene Evans at the Imagine Software offices and can confirm this an exact likeness.

> "I told Tommy Barton my conversion of Jet Set Willy wasn't good enough yet and he went off in a huff. I never saw him again"
> Chris Lancaster

A FLOCK OF SHEEP

Mint jelly and coincidences

■ Regular readers of **Retro Gamer** will know we are especially fond of Jeff Minter's 1984 shmup *Sheep In Space* and so we were intrigued when Chris told us of a game he had begun work on in 1984, right after finishing *Manic Miner*. "I had this idea of lumping sprites together, so they'd be on top of each other, and that led to this idea of rounding up sheep lost in space," he recalls. "Your spaceship looked like a big Stetson hat, flying around and herding these sheep. I went to a computer show that year and I often used to chat to Jeff Minter when I saw him. He was launching a new game at that show called... *Sheep In Space*! I couldn't believe it. That was the name I had for my game! I mean, [who] comes up with an abstract name like *Sheep In Space*?!" [Probably the entire **RG** team - Ed]. Though Chris' game was unfinished, he thinks he still has the development disk somewhere in his attic. If he ever hears a baa from up there, he's promised we'll be the first to know.

» [C64] Chris' *Sheep In Space* didn't get a release, but Jeff Minter's did and it's excellent.

That wasn't an option for me because I was still working full-time for the RAF. I'd work at Sealand all day and then code in the evening in part of the garage I'd converted.

A garage rather than a bedroom coder! Was it hard for Software Projects to secure the licence for *Crazy Balloon* from Taito?
[Laughs] They made no attempt, as far as I know. The whole notion of it being a problem if you copied someone else's game hadn't entered their heads. I took the basic concept and made up all the levels and graphics myself. It did alright, too. I made a couple of thousand quid, more than for *Bewitched*, which for the first release from a new software house was pretty good.

Plus it led to your most famous work, the C64 conversion of *Manic Miner*.
At our very first meeting, Alan told me they wanted to bring *Manic Miner* to Software Projects and would I fancy doing a version for the C64? I was really impressed with the game, especially the sound – not that the sound was good but that Matthew had managed to get the Spectrum to make anything half decent.

Did you meet Matthew Smith?
Oh yes. We'd go for meals at his favourite restaurant in Wallasey. I remember he'd always order a couple of chocolate mousses for afters.

We were always impressed by how close your C64 conversion of *Manic Miner* was to the Spectrum original.
We had initially talked about using the full screen but that would mean redesigning all the levels and changing the ratios, so we agreed we'd try to make it an exact copy. They gave me a Spectrum, which I've still got as it was the only thing it ever got used for [laughs]. I'd load up *Manic Miner*, interrupt the program and look at the mapping of all the characters. That was where my wife came in – she would read out reams of numbers for me to type in so the graphics were exactly the same.

You did an excellent job. Did you make good money, too?
I got royalties of 60p a copy again and made about £22,000 off that game, which was more than my RAF salary… but it led to some bad things.

Drink and drugs, Chris?
No, when I got my first month's royalties, that pushed me over the earnings limit and I had to become VAT registered.

» [C64] Chris took real care in making his conversion of *Manic Miner* as close to the original as possible.

» [C64] With royalties of 60p per copy sold, Chris ended up depositing £22,000 in the bank from his work on *Manic Miner*.

» [C64] Hang around for too long in *Boing* and a weight will fall from the sky and crush you. Harsh.

» [C64] It's fun spotting which screens in *Boing* must have begun as rooms in Willy's mansion. Can you work out this one?

Did you not treat yourself to a fast car?
I thought about buying a Porsche but got a Metro instead. It was a Turbo, at least. I did spend a fortune playing this online adventure game on the C64 using my 1200/75 modem. I got my character, Sarah, named after my neighbour's daughter, up to the rank of Witch. I loved that game and my phone bills would often exceed £500 a month for the pleasure!

Given the quality of your *Manic Miner* conversion, Software Projects naturally asked you to port *Jet Set Willy* to the C64.
Yes they did, as soon as the Spectrum game came out. I started by using placeholder graphics, just blobs, rather than copying the Spectrum ones, while I was getting the mechanics of the game working. Tommy Barton hadn't given me a timescale but I was in the Software Projects offices during one of my Saturday morning visits and he told me it had to be ready for this show in America. I said it wasn't good enough yet and he just said, "It has to be ready," and went off in a huff. I never saw him again.

Did you stop developing *Jet Set Willy* at that point?
No one told me not to carry on with my conversion and it wasn't until several weeks later I heard on the grapevine they'd got someone else to do it. I had stuck in the actual graphics and all the screens by then. I remember Alan [Maton] being very sheepish and apologetic when I eventually spoke to him. He kept saying it wasn't his decision. I do believe that. Tommy was the one who was pushing all the buttons – in all the wrong ways.

Shahid Ahmed ended up converting *Jet Set Willy* to the C64. Did you ever meet him?
No but I did see his version briefly and I know it didn't get the best reviews.

What happened to your version?
You know I mentioned that little girl, Sarah, who lived next door? She loved coming round and playing games on my computer. I thought I'd write something for her and as I had a working *Jet Set Willy*, I just changed the screen layouts and the graphics.

Is this what was eventually released as *Boing* in 1986?
Yes. I was chatting to someone at a show who recognised me from a photo in a magazine article when *Bewitched* had come out. He said he was surprised I'd not been asked to convert *Jet Set Willy* after *Manic Miner* and I explained I had! I told him the story of *Boing* and he said he was from Bubble Bus Software and could they publish it? I thought, why not? It wasn't a great deal of money, a few grand I think, but at least it got out there.

***Boing* has some interesting ideas but it's just too hard to be fun, especially when you only give the player one life!**
Yeah and when you die, it's painful because it goes on far too long [laughs]. I've seen reviews on YouTube which say it's unplayable but they don't think of where they could leap off one screen on to the next. Yes, it's easy to get killed but once you've learned to get through the first few screens, you've got lots of weird and wonderful stuff to explore. Sarah could play it really well and get everywhere and she was a ten-year-old girl!

***Boing* was your last published game. Did you ever consider returning to the games industry in the subsequent years?**
I did think of applying to Team17 as they were quite close to me in Wakefield but I had got a job writing accounting software for a little company and I could see it was going places. And it did.

Games were only a small part of your working life. How do you look back at those few years?
It was certainly fun. It was like an adventure because no one really knew what they were doing. A new computer came out and we'd all be thinking of how we could get the most out of it. To me, it was the excitement of getting to grips with a new processor.

If you'd got that rope swinging properly in *Jet Set Willy*, do you think your life would've been very different?
Good question. Quite possibly. But I'm very happy with the life I've got now and I wouldn't want to swap it.

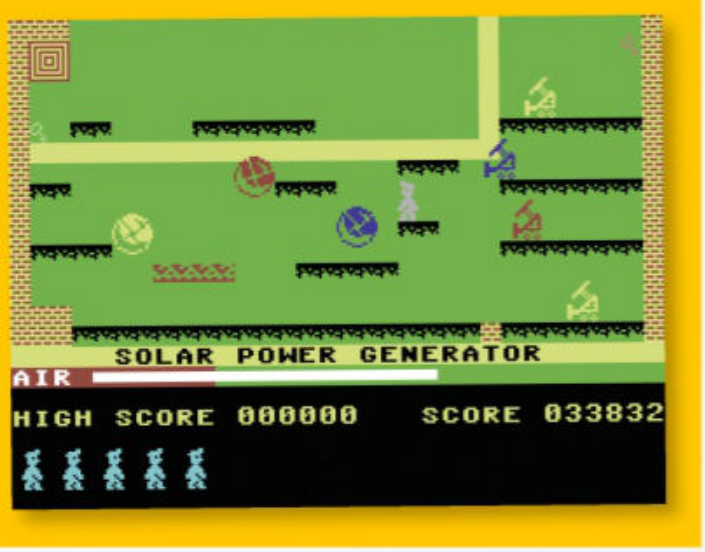
Thanks to Martyn Carroll for additional help.

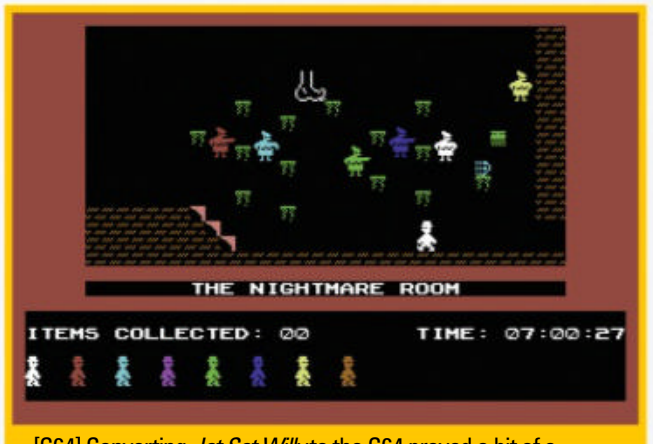
LEN WIRMILY LIVES!

Bohemian programming

■ "He was the most untidy person I've ever met, apart from me," grins Chris, when asked about his memories of Matthew Smith. "The first time I went to his house, this big old Victorian place, and saw his computer room... well, it was something else. It had this big fireplace and the mantelpiece was lined with tins of rice pudding with spoons sticking out the tops. He was chatty and friendly and we talked a lot about how he'd written *Manic Miner*. This was before I'd started on it. I mentioned some of the techniques I was going to use and he was really interested. He even said, 'Ah I can use that and fit more levels in.' This was when he was starting to think about *Jet Set Willy*." Chris may indeed have been partly responsible for the compression techniques Matthew used to cram *Jet Set Willy*'s 60 rooms into the Spectrum's memory, something he hadn't done for *Manic Miner*.

Chris' connection with Miner Willy didn't end there, as his unreleased C64 version of *Jet Set Willy* eventually morphed into *Boing*, which casts the player as Len Wirmley, tasked with 'collecting his royalties from the unscrupulous Ron Bammotty'. No prizes for working out those anagrams. There are many other nods to *Boing*'s beginnings with references to Software Projects and Willy's mansion scattered through the game and the original *Jet Set Willy* room names are still visible in the code though not displayed on screen, obviously. See Frank Gasking's excellent Gamesthatwerent.com entry on *Jet Set Willy V1* for the full story.





» [C64] Converting *Jet Set Willy* to the C64 proved a bit of a nightmare for Shahid Ahmed, whose version was released, and Chris, whose version wasn't.

Contra 4

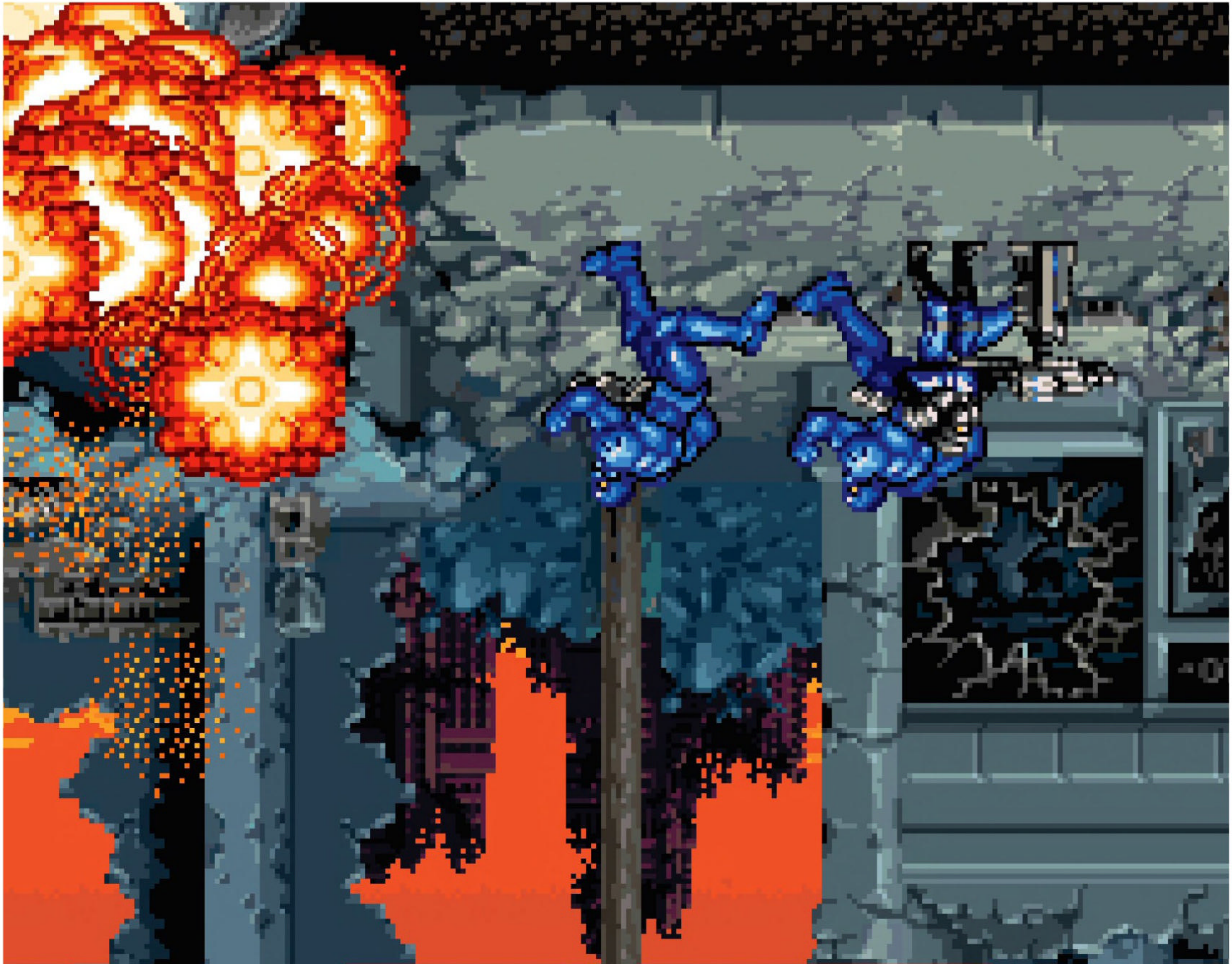
FEEL THE LOVE

» DS » 2007 » WAYFORWARD TECHNOLOGIES

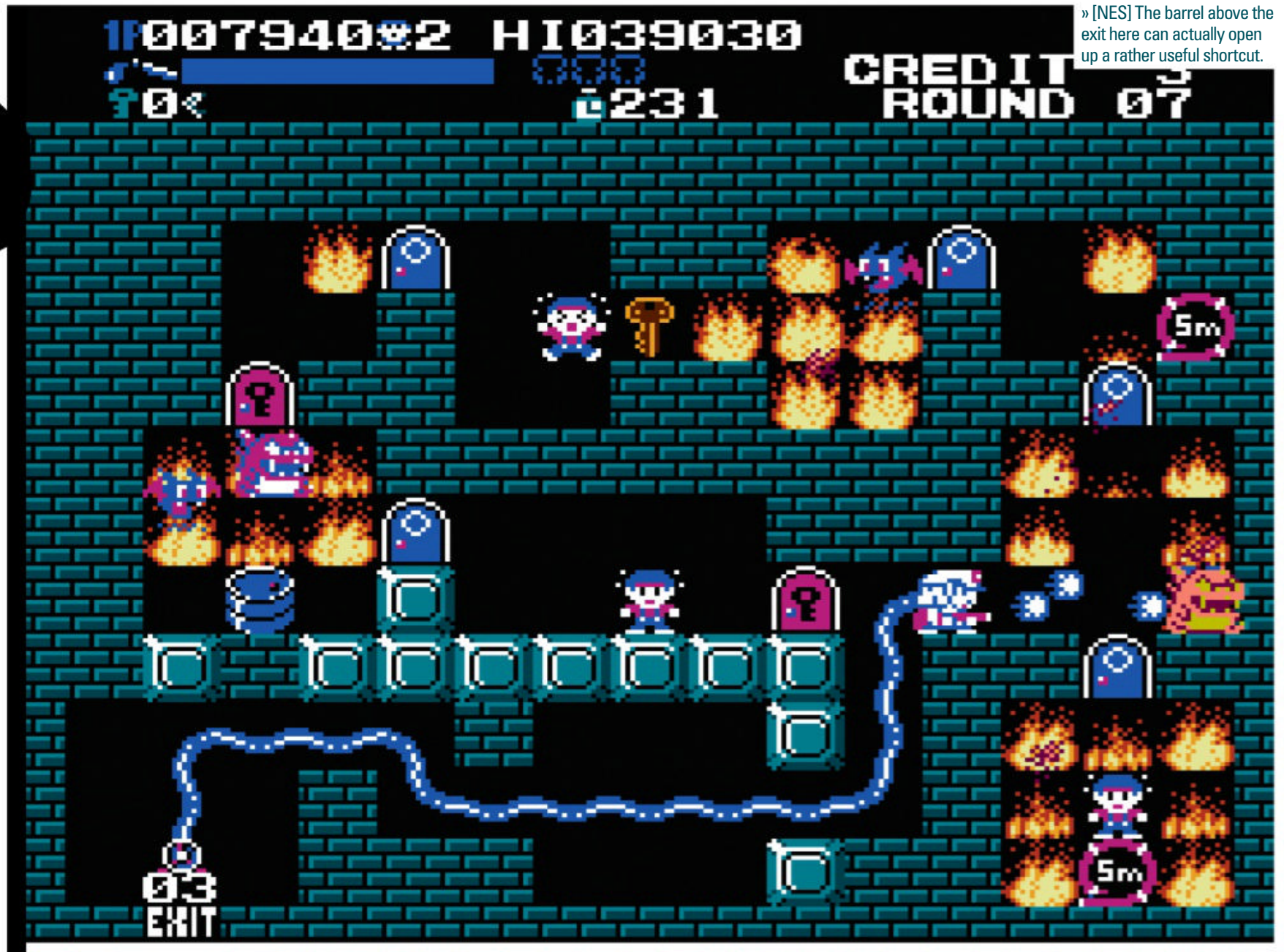
Despite the fact that it has been making games since the early Nineties, WayForward Technologies never seems to get the recognition it deserves. This is a pity as it has been behind some truly cracking games during the last 30 years, including the *Shantae* series, the glorious remake of *A Boy And His Blob* and the rather excellent *River City Girls*.

One of my favourite WayForward games is *Contra 4*, largely because it sums up everything the developer excels at – brilliant pixel art, stunning animation and imaginative use of a well-known licence. Frustratingly, *Contra 4* was never released in Europe, meaning the US version is slowly starting to rise in price. If you can justify the outlay I'd recommend you pick it up as it's a tremendously fun run-and-gun that riffs heavily on the original arcade classic, as well as *Super Contra* and *Contra Spirits*.

Contra 4's main mechanic is a grappling hook that lets you easily traverse the DS' two screens. It's a neat feature, opening up both the level design and the way you deal with enemies, which is handy as they come at you thick and fast. *Contra 4* also boasts some excellent boss fights as well, with many of them being gargantuan in size and easily filling both DS screens. All the on-screen carnage is complemented by Jake Kaufman's incredible chiptune music – a terrific mix of aggressive new beats and takes on well-loved classics from the long-running series. The end result is a chaotic, exhilarating blast of a game that plays as good as it looks and highlights why WayForward is getting given so many big IPs lately – it genuinely loves and understands the franchises it is being entrusted with. Long may it continue.



» We've got some 8-bit firefighting fun in store this month, as Blazing Rangers arrives on the NES in a blaze of glory. As well as that, you can read our verdicts on Omegabot, Breaker's Collection and Bitwave Games' first set of Toaplan shoot-'em-ups



» [NES] The barrel above the exit here can actually open up a rather useful shortcut.

Blazing Rangers

RED-HOT RETRO ACTION

» [NES] Mimi's a long way from the hose, and must rely on the water gun.

INFORMATION

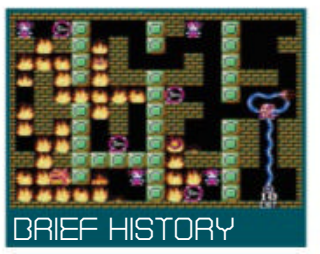
- **FORMAT REVIEWED:** NES
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PRICE:** €54.99 (PHYSICAL) / $12.99 (DIGITAL)
- **PUBLISHER:** FIRST PRESS GAMES
- **PLAYERS:** 1-2

The NES is best remembered today for its sprawling platform adventures and groundbreaking Japanese RPGs, but the early success of the Famicom in Japan was built on conversions of arcade hits like *Donkey Kong*, *Kung-Fu Master* and *Xevious*. Those kinds of games served as inspiration for *Blazing Rangers* developer Karu_Gamo, with Namco's *Dig Dug* cited as a major influence due to the way the player builds the maze.

Blazing Rangers casts you as firefighters Popo and Mimi, and your goal is simple – rescue kids from burning buildings, either solo or as a team. As well as the constantly spreading fires, you'll need to deal with monsters. Thankfully, both the monsters and the fires can be defeated with water from one of two sources. The hose is powerful and has unlimited water, but has a limited range, can't be carried past fences and slows you down. The water gun is available anywhere, but must be manually refilled by pumping water from the ground. Although your movement is limited to four directions, you can aim your shots in any direction.

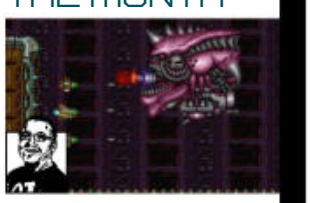
Each of the game's stages features a variety of obstacles and items. There are locked doors that halt your progress, fences which

» [NES] As walls heat up and get closer to crumbling, they begin to change colour.



» *Blazing Rangers* is a new NES game by Karu_Gamo, whose previous work includes the *Protect Me Knight* series and the NES game *Amazon's Running Diet*. The game uses the most basic functions of the console, with no special mapper chip. The music for *Blazing Rangers* was composed by chiptune musician Hydden.

✱ PICKS OF THE MONTH



DARRAN

Zero Wing

I've thoroughly enjoyed all of Bitwave Games' recent Toaplan releases, but this is easily my current favourite.

NICK

Blazing Rangers

This is the best new NES game I've played since *Micro Mages*, I can see myself playing it for years to come.

» [NES] You'll need to gather all of the keys before you can rescue the last girl here.

» [NES] We've lost control of things here, and the fire has become a raging inferno

prevent you from carrying your hose into certain areas, and oil drums that explode if they catch fire. There's usually no single best way to tackle each stage, so you'll often be forced to make difficult decisions – do you go for the key to open a door near the exit, or prioritise a hose extension to make a remote rescue easier?

Likewise, rescues carry their own sense of risk and reward. Your bonus points increase for each kid you return in a single trip, but carrying multiple kids at once slows you down and you'll lose the kids permanently if you lose a life. What's more, your choice of character will affect your approach – Popo doesn't slow down as much when he's carrying things, but Mimi's starting speed is higher. If you really want to score highly, you can also try to find the diamonds hidden in each stage, which are uncovered when you encircle them with the hose.

Blazing Rangers is a tough game, and one that succeeds in using its mechanics to support its theme. We've never been stuck in a burning building, but when the walls are burning down and you're desperately refilling your water gun because a bat chewed through your hose, you'll certainly feel the sense of panic we'd associate with that situation. In the very worst cases, when the fire reaches the stage exit, you can lose your hose completely.

There really aren't many complaints that we can muster. The Bombat enemy arguably makes the top of the screen too dangerous when it appears, especially since its projectiles can't be extinguished, and the blast radius of the red Ignizard's fireballs is quite wide. Beyond that, the basic graphics have a fair amount of charm, although there's not much variety due to the small cartridge size. Similarly, Hydden's music is excellent but we do wish there was a bit more of it.

It's worth noting that First Press Games has done an excellent job with the physical product too. From the box art to the cartridge, the game we got looks and feels like an authentic early PAL release in every regard, and US NES and Japanese Famicom variants are also available. Excellently, the game can actually be adjusted for 50Hz or 60Hz play to suit your hardware. A digital version is also available if you prefer to use an emulator or flash cart, with English and Japanese digital manuals and ROM files for all regions, and there's even a four-stage demo ROM.

The finely balanced difficulty and risk/reward mechanics make it clear that everyone involved in *Blazing Rangers* has not only a deep appreciation for the games of the era, but a keen understanding of how the best ones are designed. Any fan of Eighties arcade action should give it a look. ✱

» [NES] In this stage, the key you need is earned by defeating the boss.

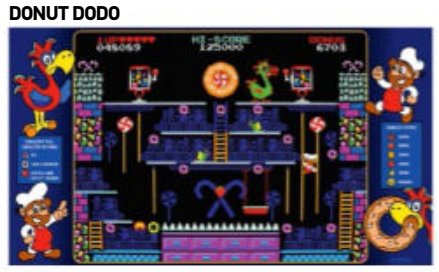
✱ WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD

BURNING RANGERS

▼ SOMETHING NEW

DONUT DODO



In a nutshell

If we didn't know better, we could genuinely be convinced that *Blazing Rangers* was a forgotten classic of the early Famicom era.

» Score **90%**

PICK OF THE MONTH

Toaplan Arcade Shoot 'Em Up Collection Vol. 1

» System: PC **» Buy it for:** £16.59, (£6.69 separately)' **» Buy it from:** Steampowered.com/Gog.com

Before it filed for bankruptcy in the early Nineties, Toaplan was generally considered to be one of the best creators of shmups around. It's pleasing then to not only see so many of its iconic games now resurfacing on various systems thanks to new owners Tatsujin, but that so many of these classics are being given the respect they deserve.

With M2 setting a high standard for Toaplan's shooters on home consoles, it's down to Bitwave Games to represent the PC market and it has done an incredible job with its collection, which includes *Twin Cobra*, *Truxton*, *Out Zone* and *Zero Wing*. Even if you just choose one of the available games, it's unlikely you'll be disappointed, as Bitwave Games has added many quality-of-life improvements and various modes, along with excellent emulation and minimal lag.

In addition to the usual screen-altering options like choosing orientations and adding borders and scanlines, all four games feature online high-score tables, the ability to save your progress, the option to slow down the game and even rewind when you die. Shmups are all about mastering the game and achieving the best scores, something Bitwave Games is well aware of. As a result it has created an amazing amount of parameters to tweak from turning on or decreasing the size of your hitbox, to adding a staggeringly comprehensive Practice mode.

Yes it's a shame none of the console versions for each game are included, but when Bitwave Games has gone to such astonishing lengths it's hard to be disappointed. No shmup fan will want to miss this.

» Score **94%**

» [PC] In addition to showing hitboxes, this mode also shows your current direction and the direction of enemies and bullets.

» [PC] As well as showing in-game instructions, borders can also display defeated enemies and other useful information.

Breakers Collection

» System: PS5 (tested), PS4, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, Switch, PC **» Buy it for:** £15.99+
» Buy it from: Online, Strictly Limited Games

The *Breakers* games are cult Neo Geo favourites, overshadowed by the system's greatest fighting games but good enough to earn a following of their own. The emulation here is solid and plenty of features have been added – Training, Team Battle and Online Versus modes are all present, with dependable rollback netcode. The CRT filter is quite disappointing, but the ability to display move lists in the wallpaper is a really nice touch. It's a stretch to call it a collection, as it comprises two games and *Breakers Revenge* is just an updated version of the original, but they have been handled with care and should satisfy fighting fans who want alternatives to the big names.

NICK THORPE

» Score **84%**

OmegaBot

» System: Switch (tested), PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, PC **» Buy it for:** £9.99+
» Buy it from: Online

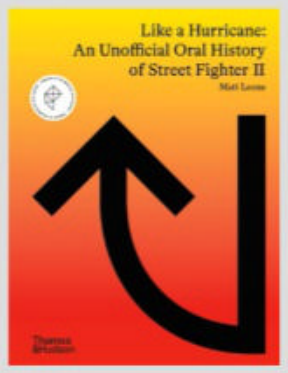
A mysterious disease has swept the world and turned humans into biomechanical monstrosities, so it's up to OmegaBot to put things right. The opening stage feels basic and unremarkable, but the level designs and enemies become more interesting from the second stage, while a regular drip feed of new weapons and abilities soon provides a satisfying moveset. The game becomes quite challenging as it goes on and feels like a linear *Mega Man* game might do, both for better and worse – the occasional frustration that comparison implies is present. Still, *OmegaBot* is solidly entertaining for the four or five hours it lasts.

NICK THORPE

» Score **75%**

Like A Hurricane: An Unofficial Oral History Of Street Fighter II

» Buy it for: £30
» Buy it from: thamesandhudson.com



If you're eager to discover how *Street Fighter II* came to dominate early Nineties gaming, author Matt Leone has created an impressively comprehensive account of its impact here. Dozens of interviewees contribute their memories of the fighting game boom over the course of more than 400 pages, providing development, marketing and even fan perspectives. *Street Fighter II* takes the lion's share of the word count, but the book also covers other key games like the *Alpha* series, *Darkstalkers* and crossovers with Marvel and SNK, with frank discussions of how games like *Street Fighter III* misfired. Visual material is sadly limited to illustrations of highlighted interviewees, but just about any fan should learn something new here.

NICK THORPE

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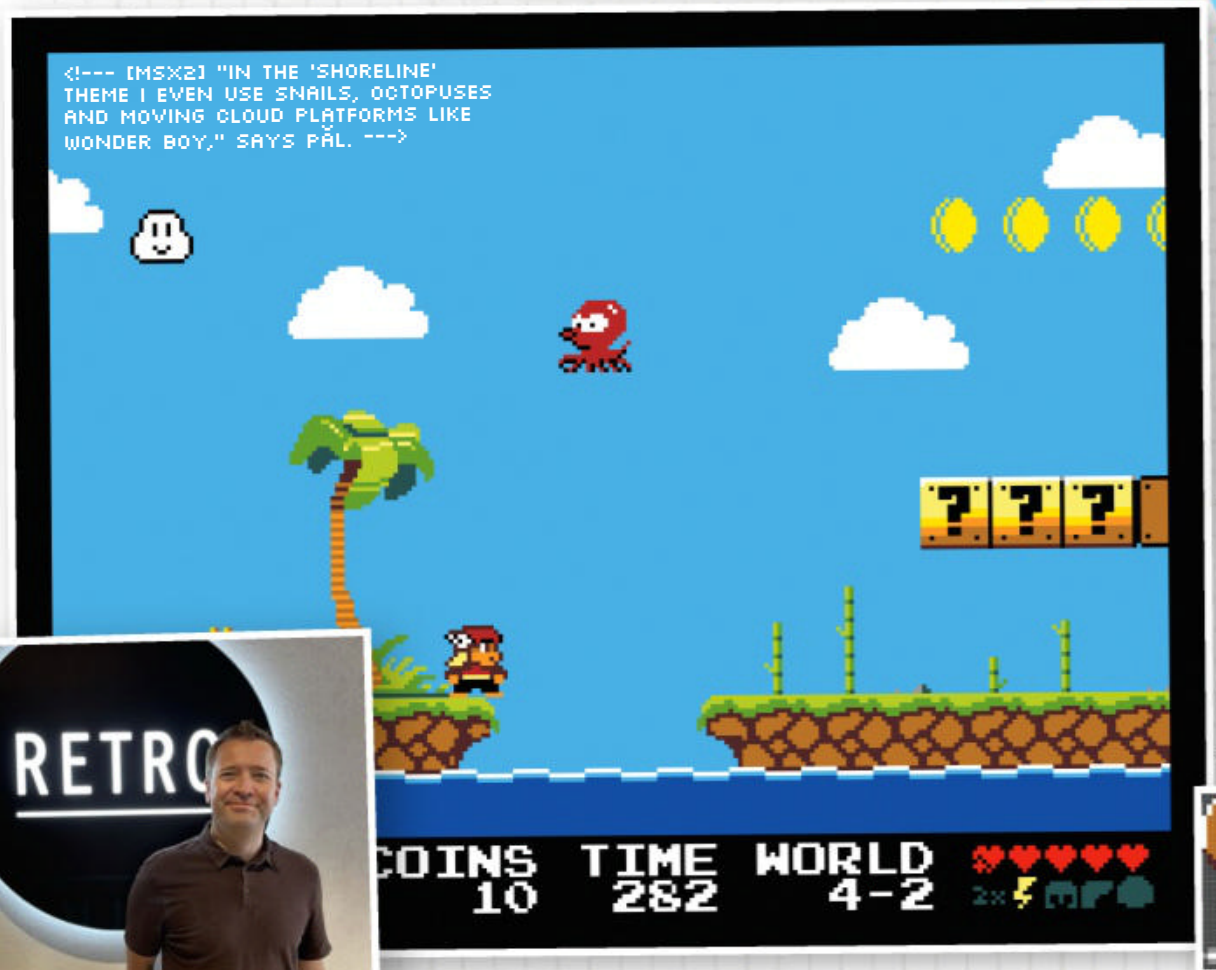
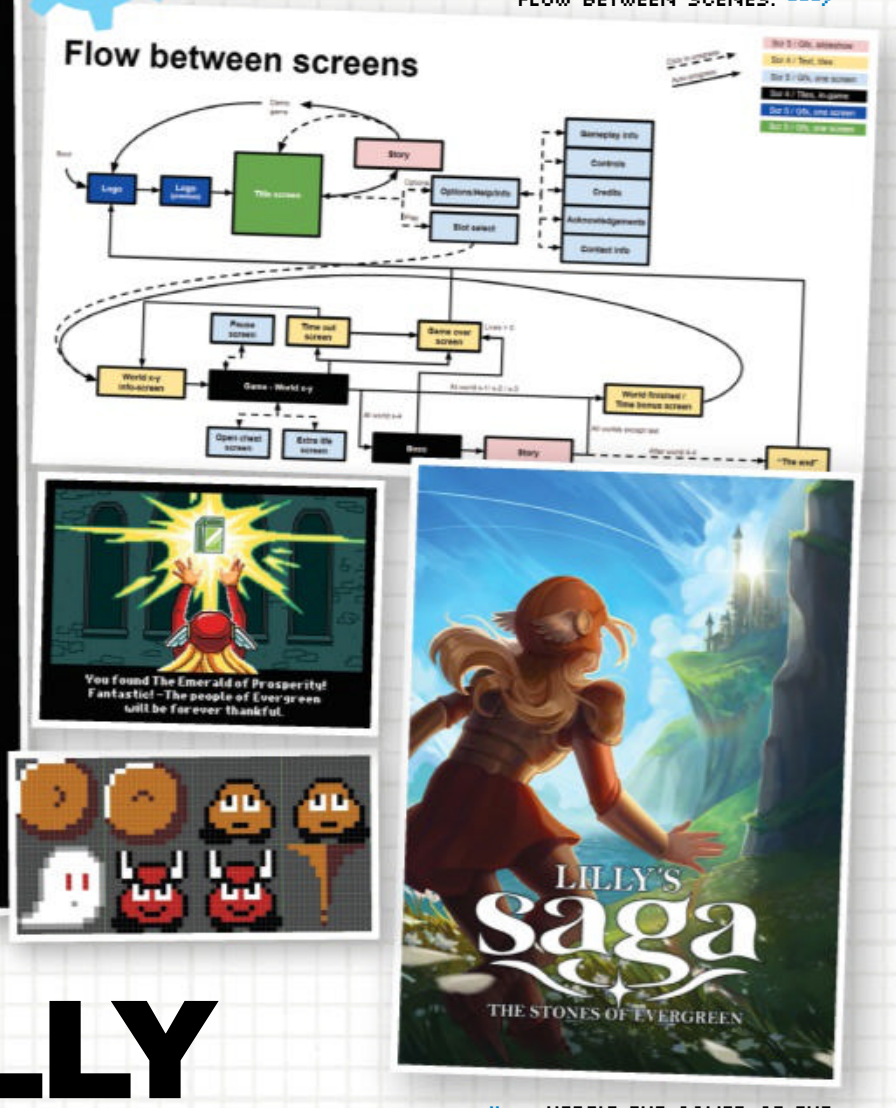


<!--- [MSX2] "IN THE 'SHORELINE' THEME I EVEN USE SNAILS, OCTOPUSES AND MOVING CLOUD PLATFORMS LIKE WONDER BOY," SAYS PÅL. --->

<!--- PÅL FROGNER HANSEN IS PROUD OF THE RECEPTION LILLY'S SAGA HAS RECEIVED. --->


Flow between screens
You found The Emerald of Prosperity! Fantastic! - The people of Evergreen will be forever thankful.
LILLY'S
saga
THE STONES OF EVERGREEN

<!--- A GLIMPSE BEHIND THE SCENES OF A DESIGN DOCUMENT, SHOWING THE "FLOW BETWEEN SCENES. --->

<!--- HERE'S THE COVER OF THE PHYSICAL EDITION CREATED BY JULIE TREVLAND. --->

<MAIN HEADER>

GILDED LILLY

<INTRO> PROGRAMMER PÅL FROGNER HANSEN DISCUSSES CREATING LILLY'S SAGA FOR MSX2, WINNER OF THE MSXDEV 2022 COMPETITION </INTRO>

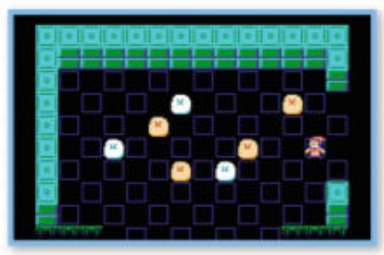
<INTRO> IT TAKES DEDICATION AND KNOWLEDGE TO BE A HOMEBREW PUBLISHER. ALLAN TURVEY LAUNCHED MIDNIGHT BREW GAMES (BIT.LY/MIDNIGHTBREW) WITH A SET OF FIVE SPECTRUM GAMES PREVIOUSLY UNAVAILABLE ON CASSETTE, EACH INDIVIDUALLY NUMBERED IN A PROTECTIVE SLIPCASE – ROUST, ASTEROIDS RX, CHEZ MAXINE, NIXY THE GLADE SPRITE, AND NIXY AND THE SEEDS OF DOOM. GOOD LUCK TO ALLAN AND THE TEAM, AND TO ALL THOSE STILL COMMITTED TO THESE CLASSIC MACHINES AS WE MOVE THROUGH 2023. </INTRO>

<BODY> **"I have promised my wife a little break now.** This *Lilly* journey has been time-consuming," Pål tells us. "While most of my friends had C64s, I had an MSX. My access to new games was not that great, so I started to look into programming. Around 2019 I discovered that the MSX scene was very much alive." Look closely and you'll see obvious inspirations for *Lilly's Saga*. "I chose the platform genre because it is my personal favourite. In my vision statements, I stated, 'Tribute to *Wonder Boy* and other legendary platformers.' I've mixed in elements from other favourites, like *Legend Of Zelda*, *Castlevania*, *Rainbow Islands* and *The Maze Of Galious*," Pål says.

The team – including artist Julie Trevland and composer Wolf – were delighted to win the esteemed prize. "We won in every category, best in gameplay, best in graphics and best in sound," Pål proudly continues. "MSXdev for me is a fantastic support to the community and a nice way to be able to reach out to players and retro enthusiasts. The deadline matched well with the time envisioned for *Lilly's Saga*'s release date. Having a hard deadline also effectively stops endless feature creep." One key aim of the game was getting its horizontal scrolling nice and smooth. "On MSX/MSX2 there is currently no good, standard way to do this," says Pål "I have chosen a way which needs careful mixing of level/ gameplay design and technology. You will need to spend a lot more cycles on the effect during a frame compared to the vertical scroll. This, in turn, means a lot fewer cycles left for other action on the screen."

Pål also tells us about the many tools that were used. Visual Code for programming, MoonBlaster for music, ayFXEdit for PSG sound effects, Tiled for level creation, Photoshop for graphics, and Piskel for animations. The openMSX debugger and emulator were also instrumental. "The game is a mix of C and Z80 assembly. For C I used SDCC (Small Device C

WORTHY WINNERS



TACTUS BY ZETA0134

(NESDev2022)

bit.ly/tactus-nes

<An 8-bit take on *Crypt Of The NecroDancer*. Fight to the beat in this rhythm-action RPG, earning gold and extra weapons./>

NEONNOIR BY STEAMKNIGHT

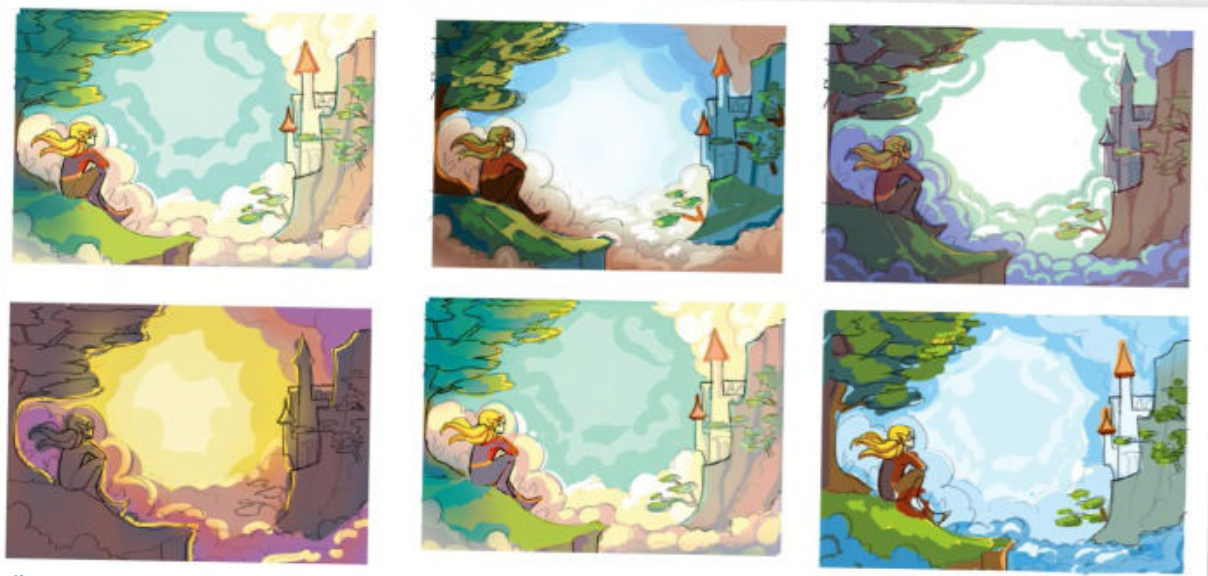
(Amiga Blitz Basic Jam)

bit.ly/neonnoir-amiga

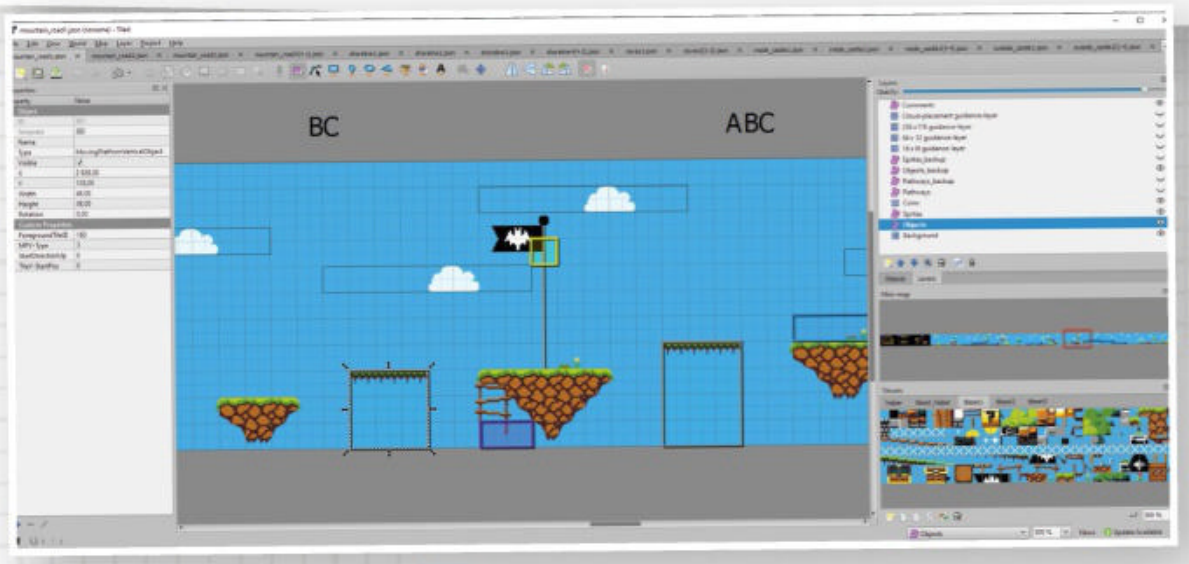
<Become a detective hunting for a missing girl in this stylish point-and-click adventure./>

NEW GAMES NEEDED

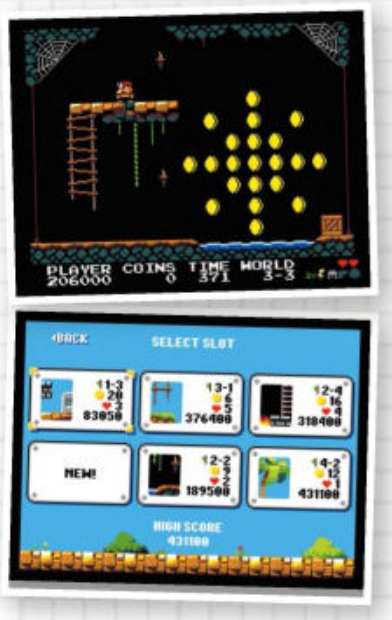
Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**



<!--- A PRODUCTION DRAWING, WITH THE ARTIST TRYING TO FIND THE RIGHT PALETTE FOR THE TITLE SCREEN. --->



<!--- [PC] EDITING LEVELS USING THE PC UTILITY TILED. --->



039 Compiler). I sketch and make notes all the time while
040 developing, so I used a remarkable2 (a digital notepad
041 which feels like normal paper)," continues Pål.
042 If you're keen on physical releases you're in luck.
043 "The free download can be played in an emulator.
044 The Premium Edition comes on its own 'MegaROM'
045 cartridge with storage capabilities, with up to six save
046 game slots available," Pål says. "The game manual
047 will include a long and detailed Making Of, following
048 the development from inception until release 2.5
049 years later." This will describe the tricks that shouldn't
050 be possible on MSX2, sketches and insights into
051 design documents. "There is also a great bonus track
052 composed for this edition. And we have multiple
053 languages: the publisher Côte Gamers will provide
054 some written material in French; however, it is not
055 decided how much will be translated." Download the
056 free version at lillyssaga.com </BODY>

<INTRO> MORE RECENT COMPETITION WINNERS </INTRO>

MARBLE BOY BY ROMAN WERNER

(RESET Craptastic 2022)

bit.ly/marbleboy-c64

<Collect flags against the clock and avoid the gaps across four challenging courses./>

ZOLF BY ISMAEL RODRIGUEZ

(LowRezJam 2022)

bit.ly/zolf-windows

<This clever adventure uses a small alien 'golf ball' to hit switches and solve puzzles./>

CASTAWAY BY THE T TEAM

(CPCRetroDev 2022)

bit.ly/castaway-cpc

<This survival adventure sees Tom trying to escape a desert island filled with cannibals!/>

NEWSBYTES

<INTRO> ALL THE LATEST NEWS, HANDILY ARRANGED BY FORMAT </INTRO>

<**Amiga AGA**: Sonic Sloth Games released *Turrican II AGA*, ported from the MS-DOS version with new graphics and hidden secrets. It also supports The A500 Mini. Find it at sonicslothgames.itch.io/turrican2aga />

<**Amstrad CPC:** Inspired by the *Locomalito* game, 21 Bloques released *Darkula64*. Download it via bit.ly/darkula64 />

<**Apple IIGS:** Check out Brutal Deluxe Software's *Karate* by visiting bit.ly/karate-gs />

<**C16:** Misfit's latest is *X-Massacre*, where you shoot enemies and protect presents. Choose your own price and get it at misfit.itch.io/x-massacre />

<**C64:** Preorders for physical versions of *Terrestrial* (previewed in issue 241) are open at bit.ly/terrrestrial-c64 while the digital download is at psytronik.itch.io/terrestrial />

<**Mega Drive:** *Final Fight MD* got a playable demo. It's available at bit.ly/ff-md-demo/>

<**MSX:** The Retro Programmer is working on a conversion of the classic *Deathchase*. A playable alpha is at bit.ly/deathchase-msx />

<**PET:** Jimbo flew to the rescue with *PETLifter*, a conversion of the classic *Choplifter*. Give it a whirl at jimbo.itch.io/petlifter />

<**VIC-20:** *Snake Games Are The Best Games* according to Hewco, with its unexpanded VIC game (top of page) also available on cassette from The Future Was 8-Bit. Get it at bit.ly/snake-vic />

<**ZX Spectrum:** Celebrating 30 years of *Turbo The Tortoise*, Jarrod Bentley modified the game with a new loading screen and improved graphics. Play it by visiting bit.ly/3IS6dLB

Become *2000AD* character Sam Slade – Robo Hunter in this isometric adventure which is at bit.ly/samslade-zx

Retro Souls launched its latest impressive game, *Ringo*. It's at zxonline.net/game/ringo/ />

<**Various:** The latest Cross-Lib game from Fabrizio Caruso (see **RG240**) is the word game *Verbix* on multiple formats. Find it at bit.ly/crosslib-verbix />

CHAMPION CODER

ANDREA BALDIRAGHI (THEROBOZ)

<INTRO> HOW READING BOOKS ABOUT OLD SOFTWARE COMPANIES GOT ANDREA INTERESTED IN PROGRAMMING HIS OWN HOMEBREW GAMES </INTRO>

<INFO FROM: ITALY, LIVING IN CHINA WEBSITE: THEROBOZ.ITCH.IO FORMAT: PICO-8, MEGA DRIVE PREVIOUS GAMES: MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE, PRINCE OF PERSIA, R-TYPE (ALL PICO-8) WORKING ON: R-TYPE (MEGA DRIVE) />

HOW DID YOU GET STARTED WITH THE PICO-8?

<I had a game idea that required a tracker-style music system and I found PICO-8 and its community. I ported my game to learn LUA and the experience was really enjoyable; I joined a game jam to push myself to continue. I was looking for a suitable game to support the next evolution of my shape-drawing system. />

WHY REMAKE R-TYPE?

<The first three levels of *R-Type* are iconic in their style and variation, and the gameplay is modern enough without being overwhelming like a bullet hell.

For *Masters Of The Universe*, I was looking for a musician and YouryKiki's style was almost exactly how I imagined the music in my head. He was keen on doing *R-Type* too. I was hoping to include an in-game music player but there were no tokens left; the soundtrack is on his Soundcloud (soundcloud.com/youry-kiki). />

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES WITH THE MEGA DRIVE PORT?

<*R-Type* was never ported to the Mega Drive but it's a very good fit for the system's capabilities, so I owed it to my 16-year-old self to give it a go. I learned from experience that porting a project is much easier than starting a new game. I stumbled upon Pigsy's *SOTN* videos that introduced me to SGDK.

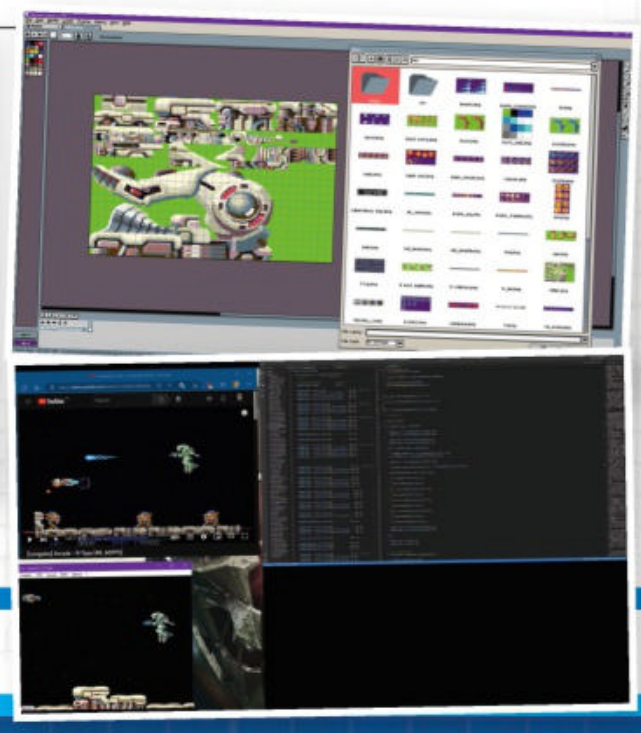
<!--- ANDREA AND HIS SON DORIAN, WHOM HE IS TEACHING TO PROGRAM THE PICO-8. --->

The code is written in C and uses the amazing SGDK libraries by Stephane-D – (github.com/Stephane-D/SGDK). I am using Visual Studio Code with the Genesis Code plugin by zerasul (github.com/zerasul/genesis-code). I am surprised by the performance I am getting from the old 68000. />

WHEN WILL R-TYPE BE FINISHED, AND WILL THERE BE A CARTRIDGE?

<I was planning to release a one-stage demo and then collect feedback before continuing with the remaining levels. While I don't own a real Mega Drive anymore, I got enough positive feedback from fans that I think it could be done with some help. />

<!--- [PICO-8] R-TYPE ON THE FANTASY CONSOLE. IT'S A VERY IMPRESSIVE-LOOKING CONVERSION. --->



DATA BURST

MUDDY RACERS

<INFO FORMAT: C64 CARTRIDGE CREDITS: MONTE BOYD FOR PROTOVISION PRICE: $6.99 DIGITAL / FROM €40 PHYSICAL WEB: BIT.LY/MUDDY-C64 / BIT.LY/MUDDY-CART />

<BODY> **After platform game *Knights 'N Slimes*, Monte returns with this slick overhead racer.** There are three sets of six courses with the Mud Flats initially open. Controls support the four-player interface and the forthcoming Protopad. You can choose a single course to race or enter the Championship of six races, while Battle Royale mode is for three or four human players. There are four 'characters', that behave differently when controlled by the computer. Coins collected in the nine-lap races or earned from achieving high positions can be spent in the Shop on speed and steering upgrades, nitro boosts and oil slicks to spin out competitors. Earn enough points to win the Championship and it will unlock the Highlands and winning there unlocks the Ruins. Progress through the game is saved to the cartridge, as are your best times.

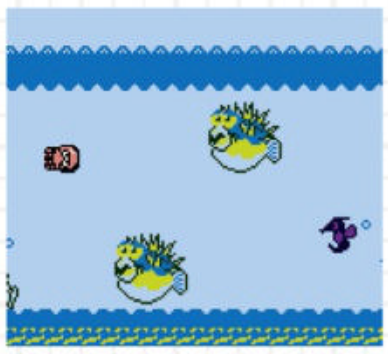
The graphics and sound are good, with the three background styles adding some nice variety. It takes some getting used to 'bouncing' off the opposing cars; sometimes you get knocked off course, which is particularly harmful when going over the jumps, as you may not properly register a lap. Still, this is solid fun for a solo player and even better with more. This is a great addition to the C64's catalogue, particularly for fans of classics such as *Super Sprint* and *Off-Road Racer*. </BODY>

SCORE: 82%

NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

THE HOMEBREWER'S KIT

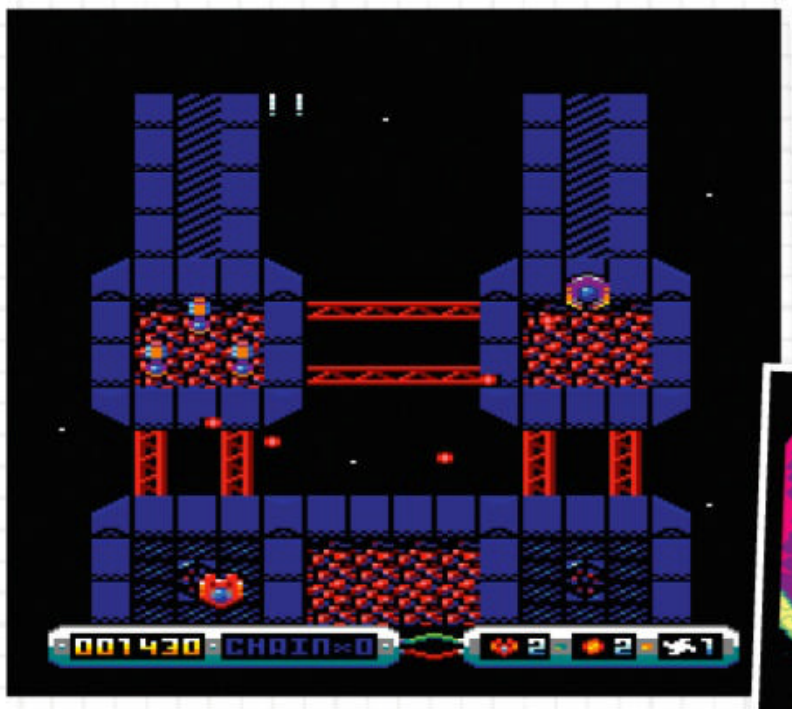


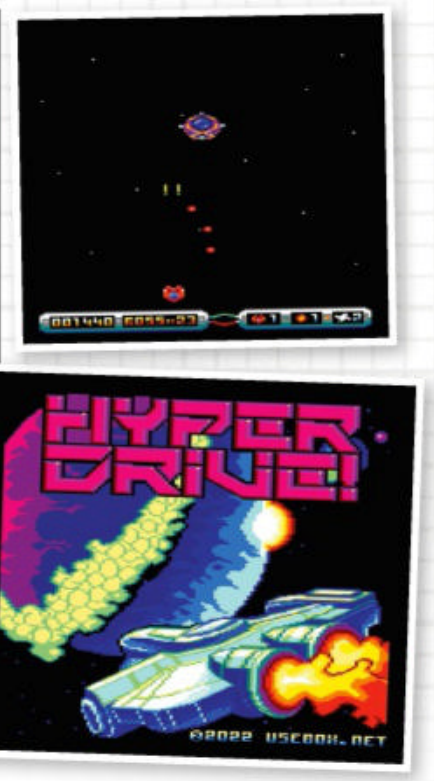
MAGIC AND LEGEND – TIME KNIGHTS

<INFO FORMAT: GAME BOY COLOR CREDITS: LEGENDARY MONKEY MAGIC FOR THE RETRO ROOM PRICE: DIGITAL TBC / PHYSICAL FROM $42.99 WEB: BIT.LY/TIMEKNIGHTS / BIT.LY/TIMEKNIGHTS-CART />

<BODY> **Magic and Legend must travel through time to stop aliens from conquering Earth!** Magic can stomp on enemies and use a close-range weapon, while Legend fires projectile weapons but cannot stomp on foes. Weapons and costumes change with the era – Present Day, Medieval Times, Sengoku Japan, Ancient Rome and Sixities London. Each level has a quota of aliens to kill, coins for bonus points, and hearts for extra lives – with four bonus levels to discover. This is classic Game Boy platforming with extremely cute graphics. The cutscenes tell a good story and the music is great too. It won't take an expert player long to finish, but it is fun while it lasts. Work has already started on the sequel *Star Seekers*. </BODY>

SCORE: 80%





HYPERDRIVE

FORMAT: AMSTRAD CPC 464 (DANDANATOR/CPR CARTRIDGE IMAGES) CREDITS: JUAN J MARTINEZ
PRICE: FREE DOWNLOAD WEB: BIT.LY/HYPERDRIVE-464

<BODY> **We've been following the development of this vertically scrolling shmup, and the result is a fun shooter with neat play mechanics.** Shooting a chain of nine enemies releases a Power-Up (to increase shot power) or a Nova Bomb (dropped with N to wipe out all enemies on-screen). However, if you wait too long, or get hit, your chain resets to zero. There are five stages with a boss on each to defeat, and while the bosses are small they put up a tough fight. The end result is a solid little blaster.</BODY>

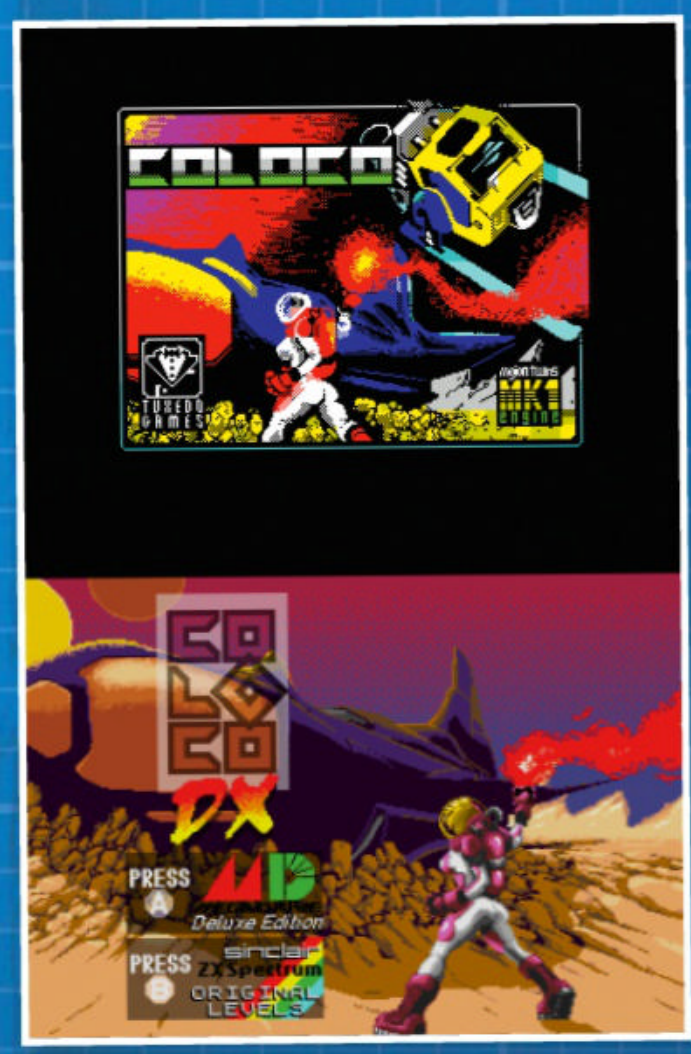
SCORE: 79%

PROCESSING

<INTRO> THE HTML GAME CONCEPT PROJECT SWOOSH FROM TUXEDO GAME DEVS WILL BECOME COLOCO DX FOR MEGA DRIVE </INTRO>

<BODY> **The original Spectrum *Coloco* was made with Mojon Twins' MK1 game engine, inspired by *Thrust II*.** Programmer Manu explains, "The Sega Genesis (Mega Drive) has always been a fantastic console for homebrew development. Accessible, well-documented, has great tools, and sports great visual and audio capabilities. Initially, the idea was to make a 1:1 port from the original Spectrum game and stop there… but soon we realised the potential for a bigger project (in terms of scale, visuals, audio, and features), and that's how *Coloco DX* was born."

The demo includes an emulated version of the Spectrum levels as a bonus, while the expanded gameplay adds drills to get through rocks and creatures to avoid; the aim is to rescue the stranded pilots before running out of time and fuel. Developed using C and the SGDK by Stephane-D, Manu adds, "The plan is always to bring our games into a physical format. We usually have them also released as a downloadable ROM." Visit tuxedogamedevs.com for more news and other games. </BODY>



<!--- COMPARING THE SPECTRUM LOADING SCREEN AND THE MEGA DRIVE'S MENU. --->

HOT TOPIC

RETROBATES MULL OVER THE SCENE'S MOST INTRIGUING ISSUES

» [PlayStation] Publishers, you're missing a trick – bundle a free T-Shirt with your next big release.

THE PRICE ISN'T RIGHT

We chat about the cost of gaming

DARRAN JONES

NICK THORPE

TIM EMPEY

Everyone on the Retro Gamer team still plays new games and that can feel like a costly endeavour, especially when everyone's feeling the pinch. Are things really worse than they used to be, though? We arranged a little financial chat to find out.

NICK

PS5 and Xbox Series X/S games are £70 now. Is that too much to pay for a game?

DARRAN

Of course it is. Although this is coming from the man who spent £110 on a US copy of *Star Fox*. I'm pretty sure you could buy a PAL SNES at the time for £100.

TIM

Yep, it would have to be a massive release for me to consider spending that much on a new game.

DARRAN

So what current game would you happily spend £70 on, Tim?

TIM

I can't think of one. I still have to upgrade to a Series X over my Xbox One, and I kind of need to do that quickly as a lot of new games aren't coming to the One any more.

DARRAN

The newest game I've bought recently was *The Last Of Us Part 1*. I simply waited for Black Friday and paid £42 for it.

NICK

The last game I bought was *Fast RMX*. I spent £44.99 for a physical copy of it, which is mad because I already had a digital copy. But here's another question: Dreamcast games cost £40 when that system launched in 1999. Was that a reasonable price?

DARRAN

I didn't have a problem spending that much. I think a lot of it is a psychological barrier. After all, £70 isn't that far off £100, which just seems an insane amount of money to spend on a videogame, no matter how good it is.

TIM

I bought *Resident Evil 2* on PlayStation for £42.99, and later my girlfriend at the time bought me *Final Fantasy VIII*, which was about £45. Both of those felt expensive, but at least I got a T-Shirt with *Resi 2*.

DARRAN

That's probably worth a fortune now, Tim!

NICK

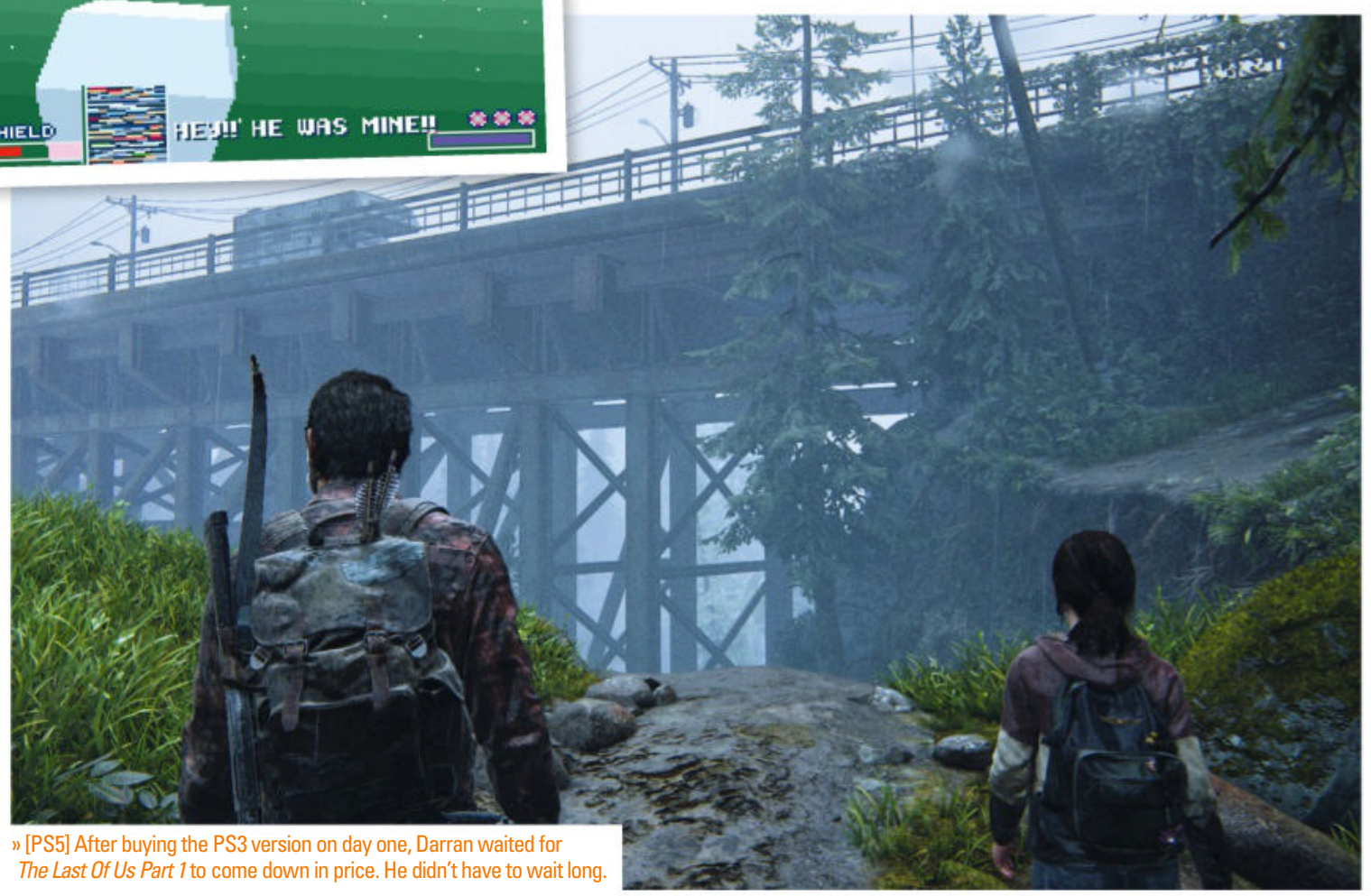
See, that's interesting. According to the Bank Of England's inflation calculator, £40 in 1999 money is equivalent to £70 in 2023. Is it really just us recoiling in horror at a high number, regardless of how that number relates to our actual income?

DARRAN

That is interesting. In some cases I guess you could make the argument that games aren't

» [SNES] Adjusted for inflation, Darran's import copy of *Star Fox* would cost £217 today. Wow.

> "I dithered for a few days before splurging on Crisis Core Reunion over Christmas"
>
> **TIM EMPEY**



» [PS5] After buying the PS3 version on day one, Darran waited for *The Last Of Us Part 1* to come down in price. He didn't have to wait long.

» [N64] *Turok*'s high price wasn't driven by a huge budget, but by expensive cartridge manufacturing.

that expensive in that they haven't really risen in line with inflation. I still refuse to pay £70 for a new game. Sod that.

NICK

They certainly haven't risen in line with inflation. *Phantasy Star* selling for £39.95 in 1988 is equivalent to a game launching for about £102 in modern money. *Streets Of Rage 3* – £59.99 in 1994 money, £116 today. *Turok*, £69.99 in 1997, that'd be £126 today.

TIM

That's mad, but it feels like you said – balking at the high number. £50 seems to be the cut-off point for me. And even then I dithered for a few days before splurging on *Crisis Core Reunion* over Christmas.

DARRAN

Holy hell. Those inflation prices are insane. Maybe games feel too expensive now because most of us have other needs that are more important than owning the latest game?

TIM

Probably, but one other thing that sometimes stops me buying new games is Games Pass. Especially after the whole *Marvel's Guardians Of The Galaxy* debacle, when it arrived on the service a few months after I'd bought it at full price.

DARRAN

Yeah, I can see how that would stay your hand, Tim. I do think that regardless of whether you can afford the price or not, it's always worth waiting because many games do come down in price so quickly. Would you agree with that, Nick?

NICK

I think so, unless you're waiting for first-party Nintendo stuff – they're evergreen games with evergreen prices. They used to have budget lines like Selects and Player's Choice, but those

» [Xbox One] *Marvel's Guardians Of The Galaxy* quickly hitting Games Pass has made Tim think twice about buying new games.

are long gone. That's a big thing I guess – the budget sector isn't anything like what it used to be.

DARRAN

That's actually a really good point, Nick. I wonder why budget labels don't exist anymore? Has there even been any budget labels this gen?

NICK

Sony had the PlayStation Hits line, but it wasn't really a big deal – certainly not as instantly recognisable as the old Platinum games.

DARRAN

Seems a misfire from devs. On the other hand digital store prices are more aggressive these days, so maybe they want us all buying digitally?

TIM

You can always wait for a sale to come along.

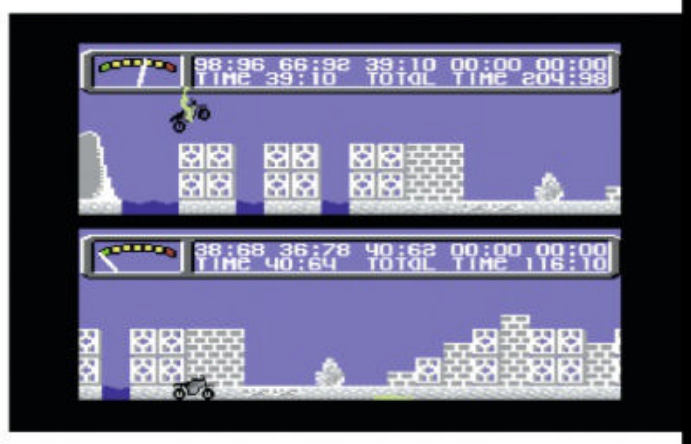
DARRAN

I did a tweet online recently and many have given up on physical games because the online sale prices are so cheap.

TIM

No free T-shirts though.

» [Amiga] It wasn't just console prices – *Shadow Of The Beast*'s £24.99 RRP from 1989 is equivalent to £60 today.



» [C64] The glory days when companies like Mastertronic could focus solely on budget publishing are long gone.

» [Switch] By sticking rigidly to physical releases only, Nick chooses to forego lower prices and major discounts.

READERS REACT

How do you feel about changing game prices?

Brian @ UKGN
Only game I've ever paid more than £50 on was *Super Street Fighter II* on the SNES. I refuse to pay £70 for anything and if you shop smart there's no reason to. *Returnal*, *Gran Turismo 7* and *Horizon Forbidden West* have all been bought on PS5 for less than £40 either on release or just after.

Marcus Wilson
I keep my eyes peeled at the sales in the Nintendo eShop. I really miss the days when Mastertronic, Codemasters and Hit Squad ruled the gaming markets though.

WiredWorm
I've barely noticed because it's quite rare for me to buy a game now thanks to Game Pass. Last game I bought was *Atari 50* and for a change the digital version was cheaper than the physical product so I went that route. As a retro title it was priced fairly competitively.

Daniel Richardson
The games may have cost 50 quid back in the Nineties but at least you could rent them from Blockbuster first to see if they were any good.

phodiculous
My friend paid £100 for *Pokémon Stadium 2* and I remember *Phantasy Star IV* and *Streets Of Rage 3* being too expensive to get at launch. I guess it's more stagnant wages that make people so frustrated with price increases.

Chris Wall
I'd rather spend £70 on 20 odd older games to build my collection up than pay £70 for a brand-new PS5 game, they usual plummet in price after six months anyway. Don't even get me started on DLC. A lot to be said for retro gaming and no uploads and DLC!

Matt Elms
For some reason £80 for a Japanese import of *Cybernator* for SNES back in the Nineties didn't feel as bad as a £70 game today. It's rare that I'll break Guybrush Threepwood's £20 a game rule nowadays.

Paul Sunderland
To be honest any system has been expensive. Take the VCS, late-Seventies/early Eighties cartridges were about £30 minimum.

Richard
My daughter plays games on her tablet and I find the constant upgrades frustrating. Appreciate the business model has changed, but an up-front price for the full game would make me feel less cheated.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

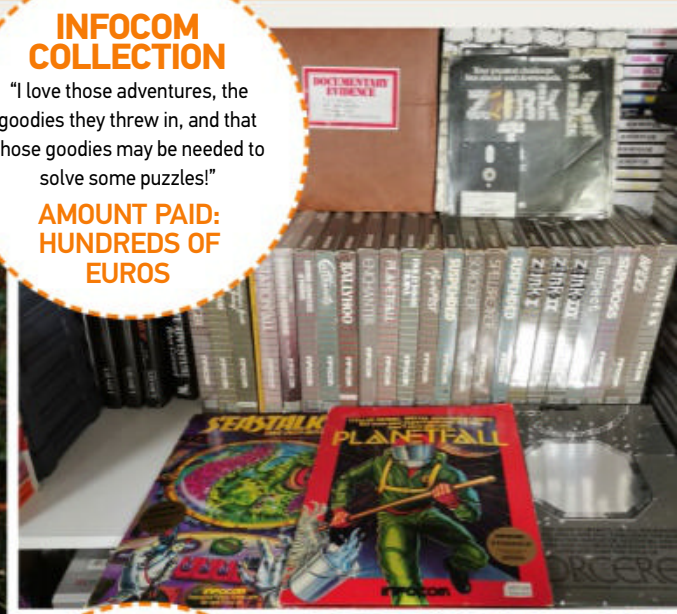
READERS TAKE US THROUGH **THE RETRO KEYHOLE**

» Jaime (left) and Rafeal are both big Amstrad fans.

DRAGON 200

"I received my first programming lessons at school on a Dragon 32. This is the Dragon computer I use today... for playing."

AMOUNT PAID: EXCHANGED IT FOR AN ENTERPRISE 128



INFOCOM COLLECTION

"I love those adventures, the goodies they threw in, and that those goodies may be needed to solve some puzzles!"

AMOUNT PAID: HUNDREDS OF EUROS

CASIO PV-1000

"With this one I think I put an end to our console collection. I believe I don't need any more consoles. It's the end of madness."

AMOUNT PAID: AROUND €80

YOU'RE HIRED!

Lord Sugar once discussed creating an Amstrad museum but Jaime González Soriano may have beaten him to it

BIO

NAME:
Jaime González Soriano

LOCATION:
Madrid, Spain

ESTIMATED VALUE OF COLLECTION:
Sorry, don't want to say

FAVOURITE SYSTEM:
Amstrad CPC

FAVOURITE GAME:
Hammerfist

TWITTER:
@johnnyfarragut

There's no way of sugar-coating this but Jaime González Soriano's ambition to collect a complete set of Amstrad CPC games is sure to be a task too far. What's more, he knows that's the case. "It is almost impossible to achieve a full set," he laments. "There are always unknown releases made in Greece, Netherlands, Poland or New Zealand that keep surfacing so I can't imagine how big the complete set would be or even if we would ever be able to know all of the items that should be included."

Nevertheless, he's still managed to amass an impressive collection. He has walls lined with games stacked on top of one other, with shelves visibly groaning under the weight. His display is also peppered with hardware large and small, and, as well as CPC gear, there are many other retro computers and games dotted around. "I guess I've been collecting since I started buying videogames," he says. "My parents' house is big so I never had to throw anything away."

Over the years, Jaime has been assisted by his friends. "When they were forced to get rid of their old consoles, computers and comic books, they ended up in my place and, by the mid-Nineties, we had a decent vintage game room in my parents' basement."

Among the prized possessions are an Amstrad CSD (a shop-based machine that demonstrated GX4000 console games) and a Dobbertin hard disk drive for the CPC together with hard-to-find Amstrad games such as *La Geste d'Artillac*, *Guillem de Berguedà*, *Alphakhor* and *Sophos*. There's also an Aleste 520EX – a rare CPC clone developed in 1993 in Siberia by Patisonic. Oh, and there's a complete collection of **Retro Gamer** magazines too! [Nice – Ed]

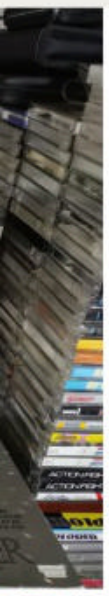
Not that you'll see them at Jaime's house, though. He collects with partner Rafael 'cpcmaniaco' Delgado and their collection is split over two properties. "We decided to put all of our CPC games together at my place and all the magazines at his," Jaime says. "But I am interested in other platforms such as the Commodore 64 , Atari and MSX as well," Jaime continues.

It's why the collection includes a host of arcade cabinets. "I love arcade games from the early Eighties and I come back again and again to *Black Tiger*, *Popeye*, *Bomb Jack*, *Shao-lin's Road* and *Rygar* on the arcade cabinets," Jaime says. "We have also managed to get some uncommon yet very much sought-after and expensive games and systems such as Electronic Arts' flat editions on 5.25-inch floppies, a RAM-expanded Sharp X68000 with its own monitor and some Sierra, Lucasfilm, Lankhor and Trillium/ Telarium adventures."

In all, it has taken 30 years to get to this point and it's certainly surpassed the available space. "It would be a problem to move it to a bigger place but I know I will have to do that someday," Jaime says. With that in mind, he's also learned a lesson. "You need to decide what you really like and what you're really going to use and focus on it," he says. "To have everything is a recipe that comes to no good."

Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com



ALESTE 520EX

"A Russian clone of the Amstrad CPC, but it can also run patched MSX and MSX2 games, and MSX-DOS too. This system – along with the PCW 16 – comes close to being a Super-Amstrad CPC."

AMOUNT PAID: $350

JEWEL IN THE CROWN

AMSTRAD CSD KIOSK + AMSTRAD PLUS CARTRIDGES

■ "This was used to show the GX4000 in big stores. We also have all the games released for the system, except for one: you guess which!"

PAID: €1,000 FOR THE KIOSK & CSD, ALMOST €500 FOR THE GAMES

BARGAIN HUNT

Your guide to the rising world of retro prices

THE COVER STAR

TETRIS

This was a huge hit in the Eighties and the popularity of the Game Boy version saw this continue into the next decade as well. A loose cartridge is commonly available and you can generally pick one up for between **£5** and **£10** (the higher prices include a manual). Boxed versions are rarer and will set you back around **£90.**

CONTRA 4

Konami's game was never released on Nintendo's DS in the UK so if you want a copy, you need to buy a Japan or US version. For the latter, expect to pay **£25** for a loose cart and **£45** to **£60** for a boxed copy. You can double that for the Japan variant.

MARKO'S MAGIC FOOTBALL

Simply known as *Marko* in the US, this 1994 platformer can be had for between **£7** and **£14** on the Mega Drive. But you'll pay upwards of **£60** for the Game Gear game with a mint condition copy selling for as much as **£180** and more than **£500** for a sealed Mega-CD version!

COSMIC SMASH

This 2001 arcade port for the Dreamcast is doubly collectible because it came in a DVD case. A sealed copy released in Japan can cost about **£110** and upwards of **£75** if it has been opened.

CLASSIC CONTROLLER

Get stuck into those retro gems with a more traditional pad. We spotted an unused sealed controller for **£25** so don't pay more than that for one which has been well thumbed. You can get a nice gold controller for a tenner more. Photo credit: Evan Amos.

TRASHMAN

Malcolm Evans' game from 1984 was by no means rubbish so some gamers have been prepared to pay as much as **£8.50** for it. You may find it hiding away in a job lot, however, or available for a couple of quid.

THE WAY OF THE EXPLODING FIST

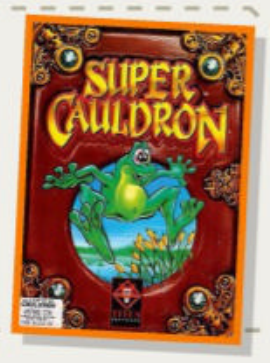
You shouldn't need to fight your way to a copy of this 1985 game developed by Beam Software. Commodore 16/64 and Spectrum versions go for about **£3** to **£5.** You can pay **£4** or so for a big box version for the Amstrad CPC (or a quid for a normal one).

SIMCOPTER

This 1995 effort by Maxis is no flight of fancy for budding retro collectors. There are plenty of versions flying around for between **£3** and **£8** although a sealed version for Windows 95 has recently fetched **£130!**

HOW MUCH?!

SUPER CAULDRON



Created by Titus in 1992, this superb scrolling platform game is known to be a rarity on the Amstrad CPC so it's no surprise to see a dozen or so people vying to grab a copy. One disk version recently fetched a cool **£238** on a well-known auction site!

Prices correct at time of print

MY RETRO LIFE

PERSONAL STORIES ABOUT OUR **SHARED PASSION**

MATTERS OF IMPORT

In which Nick accuses Nintendo of killing import gaming

Though I've been very fortunate in many aspects of my life, one thing I haven't done as much as I'd like is foreign travel. I've been to France a few times and Germany twice, but that's it – I still haven't been to Japan, nearly three years after the pandemic put paid to my plans to go there. But not all is lost, as I can watch my North America DVDs and munch on Asian snacks as I shop for European soft-drink syrups online, all from the comfort of my living room. We do live in an age of convenience, and you probably won't be surprised to learn that my importing habit started with videogames.

I was actually aware of import games for a long time before I ever actually started importing them myself. I know that the first copy of *Sonic 2* that I ever saw was the Japanese version, because the box art was imprinted indelibly in my mind, and my dad's copy of *Mortal Kombat II* was a Genesis version. Magazines told me that import games would run faster than UK ones, but that they wouldn't run on my consoles, and showed photographs of exciting scenes from Japan when new systems hit the market.

Ironically, when I finally did take the plunge, it was on a console that should have made importing less attractive. The Dreamcast gave me full-speed, full-screen games for the most part, but it was still easy to feel hard done by when games like *Daytona USA 2001* and *Outtrigger* arrived in Europe with their online functions stripped away. That was still better than the likes of *Capcom Vs SNK 2*, which never arrived at all. I ended up with just enough money to satisfy my desire for new Dreamcast games and bought *Border Down* from Lik Sang, for what I thought was a very reasonable £40 – not knowing about the £12 import charge it then would attract.

I was soon hooked, and moved beyond the Dreamcast to other systems. The habit has faded over the years, though – the last few new gaming items I imported were my Game Gear Micros, my Astro City Mini and the *Aleste Collection* for PS4. Personally, I blame the Nintendo DS, which is funny because it was one of the systems I imported the most. During the system's heyday, I could get games before they hit our shores, and a favourable exchange rate meant that I could get them cheaper too. The post-room manager at the university was a gamer himself and soon caught on to my habits – when I went down to pick up the latest *Pokémon* game, he cut to the chase and simply asked me, "*Diamond* or *Pearl*?"

The thing is, the massive sales and broad demographic appeal of the DS allowed publishers to take chances on all sorts of games that never would have reached our shores before. Sure, I got the *Ace Attorney* games a little more quickly and affordably, but it's not like I wouldn't have got them without importing. Things certainly didn't change overnight – importing the DS version of *999: Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors* was the only way to get it, after all – but it does feel like a turning point.

> "I was soon hooked, and moved beyond the Dreamcast"
> **NICK THORPE**

When I look at the PS4 games on my shelf, I see some old games that only recently received localisations, like *The Silver Case* and *428: Shibuya Scramble*. But I also see games like *Final Fantasy VII Remake* and *The King Of Fighters XIV*, and I have to remind myself that even popular series like those were import staples at one point in time – a fact that seems absurd now, but will be well remembered by those of us who played through the SNES and PlayStation eras.

So I'm pleased that I don't import new games as much as I used to, and not just because the British pound isn't nearly as strong as it once was. Being a gamer in this part of the world is just far better than it used to be – when I see a cool new game announced, I can expect it to arrive in the UK, and to run properly and with all its features intact. That means that when I'm browsing Japanese auction sites today, I'm usually looking for the same kind of stuff I was when I first started importing. ✱

GLOBAL SHOPPING LIST

WHAT'S POPPED THROUGH NICK'S LETTERBOX LATELY?

KIM'S CONVENIENCE: THE COMPLETE SERIES
I loved this sitcom and don't want to rely on Netflix continuing to license it forever, so I got the DVDs.

NECRONOMIDOL CHEKI
One photograph of my favourite Japanese idol group, taken shortly before their last performance to date.

SEGA SATURN MODEM
This is the Japanese model, complete in box with the original discs. Who's up for a game of *Sega Rally*?

NEMLESSS – BOSSS RUSH CORE
An album of hyperactive J-pop mixed with digital hardcore. I'd expect it to be called "very noisy" by Darran.

SODASTREAM SYRUPS
Cherry, Spezi and Mountain Dew from Germany. The first two are lovely and the Mountain Dew is absolutely awful.

I LEARNED TO READ HIRAGANA AND KATAKANA BACK IN 2013, WHICH IS HELPFUL WHEN A SHELF LOOKS LIKE THIS.
I WASN'T JOKING ABOUT THE DRINK SYRUPS – WHY DOES GERMANY GET A GREATER VARIETY OF FLAVOURS?
NET
SEGASATURN NETWORKS
セガサターン モデム
SEGASATURN MODEM
HSS-0127
お知らせ
THE SATURN MODEM IS STILL USEFUL, SO LONG AS YOU HAVE A DREAMPI AND A WAY TO PLAY PATCHED GAMES..

I HAVE SOME IMPORT HARDWARE TOO, SUCH AS US NES AND SNES CONSOLES, A JAPANESE SEGA MARK III, AND THE PC ENGINE CD HERE.
[DS] BACK IN THE MID-NOUGHTIES, I WAS IMPORTING THE PHOENIX WRIGHT GAMES OUT OF IMPATIENCE MORE THAN ANYTHING..
[DREAMCAST] KNOWING BORDER DOWN'S VALUE TODAY, £52 AFTER IMPORT TAX DOESN'T FEEL LIKE SUCH A BAD PRICE TO PAY.
ONE FRIEND BOUGHT ME INITIAL D: STREET STAGE WHILE SHE WAS IN JAPAN, AS WE'D SEEN THE FILM TOGETHER.
THE WAY SONIC AND TAILS' NAMES CROSSED OVER ON THE JAPANESE BOX ART ALWAYS STUCK IN MY MIND.
THE ALESTE COLLECTION IS ONE OF THE FEW IMPORT PS4 GAMES THAT HAVE TRULY INTERESTED ME. THE GAME GEAR MICRO IT CAME WITH DIDN'T HURT EITHER..
IT'S FAIR TO SAY I COMPENSATED FOR THE CANCELLATION OF MY HOLIDAY TO JAPAN WITH PLENTY OF JAPANESE GAMES.
Phoenix
That's simple, Your Honor. A broken pair of glasses.
Evidence
Profiles
Attorney's Badge
Back
SUPER SYSTEM CARD
SONIC 2
SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2
TAILS
ASIAN VERSION
SEGA
ALESTE COLLECTION
PlayStation.2
SEGA SATURN
GUILTY GEAR

GAMING GLOBE-TROTTERS

Readers tell us how and why they got into imports

Kara Jane Adams
I really wanted a PC Engine and had no other way of getting one, the reason at the time being I wanted the best home version of *Vigilante*, which I picked up with the console.

Martin Lowe
There was a shop in Nottingham called Another World and it had a floor dedicated to imports. It was absolutely magical looking at the different games and box art. My first import game was bought from there – *Monster World II* on Game Gear.

Kraig A Keller
I was a US Saturn owner, need I say more? OK, I will. I knew about Japan-only games from reading *EGM* and *GameFan* for years, but the price tags kept me away. But with my Saturn, it was an absolute necessity and I haven't looked back.

Lee Abrahams
I had no interest until the PlayStation and then there were tons of JRPGs that never came to the UK that I simply had to have. *Parasite Eve* and *Final Fantasy Tactics* still stick in my mind.

Mat Allen
Technically on the C64 in 1991 once I got a disk drive, and could play a few US disk-only titles that never came out here. Soon after, got a US SNES and was playing imports via the local market stall that got them in from America and Japan...

Will
Just after its launch I had been reading whispers about *Rhythm Tengoku* on some forums and I needed it in my life. It was this perfect hidden random wonder and some of the best money I ever spent in my life.

John Murray
It was *Star Fox Command* on the DS, it was gonna take ages to come to the UK and I got wrecked on import when UPS arrived at the door.

Martin
Your lordship and his American SNES started me off on the path to 60Hz goodness. Being Darran Jones' cousin has its benefits.

MAILBAG

HAVE YOUR SAY... SEND US A LETTER OR MAKE YOURSELF HEARD ON SOCIAL MEDIA – **TWITTER.COM/RETROGAMER_MAG**

WIN!

Every month, one lucky writer-in will receive a spanking copy of one of our classic retro books. Good luck everyone!

DIB DIB DIB, DOB DOB DOB

Hello **Retro Gamer**,
I was just wondering if you could perhaps do a review on the wonderful (and strange) game called *Planet Dob*, released by Hudson Soft in 1999. It's part 3D platformer, part point-and-click adventure and it just captures the essence of the whole 'Y2K aesthetic'. The music is also lovely, made by the Japanese band Date Of Birth (perhaps that is why the main character is called Dob). It is pretty obscure since it doesn't even have a Wikipedia article but it's quite fun.
John Johnathan

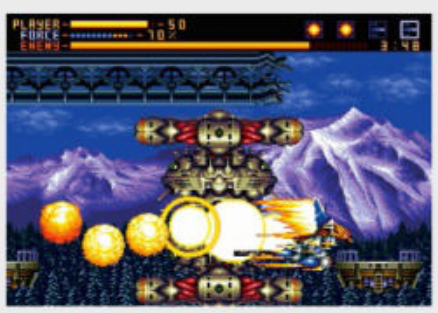
What an interesting game, John. It feels like *Planet Dob* would be a good game to lead a Minority Report, especially since we've not done one for ages. Leave it with us and we'll see what we can do.

» [PlayStation] It looks very cool, but *Planet Dob* is one of those seemingly unfathomable Japanese games.

STAR LETTER

MEGA MONEY?

Hi **Retro Gamer**,
I felt like the Mega Drive Mini 2 might not be for me, and thanks to your review I made the decision not to buy it, so thanks for saving me some cash. It did make me think of something, though. If there are companies making money off of new Mega Drive cartridges and companies selling Mega Drive clones of all kinds of quality, there must be a market for bringing the console back. Why doesn't Sega just cut out the middle man and re-release the Mega Drive properly, with a cartridge slot and newly manufactured games, instead of doing these limited mini systems? You'd think a new run of *Alien Soldier* carts would probably sell pretty well.
Tom Potter



» [Mega Drive] Maybe Sega will work with a company like Retro-Bit to reissue *Alien Soldier*? We can dream.

» We try to forget these systems, but we just can't. Sorry we've reminded you of them.

We can't say for sure, but we'd guess it's too much hassle – high-quality clones like the Analogue Mega Sg are expensive, new cartridges aren't cheap either, and mixing new carts with old hardware or vice versa is probably more customer support trouble than it's worth. Officially licensed Mega Drive clones with cartridge slots were available until relatively recently, made by AtGames. They usually weren't very good, with composite video and dodgy audio, but they were available in mainstream stores and packed with games. Sega must have some idea of how well those sold, and you'd imagine that the company weighed up that information before going with the Mega Drive Mini the first time around.

CHOICES, CHOICES

Hi **Retro Gamer**,
With so much choice in the gaming world now, with current consoles, plus generations worth of older consoles, how do you go about deciding what to play next? I try to switch between shorter games and longer games to avoid burnout. I tend to stick to one console too.

I'm currently on an arcade fix and I've been really enjoying exploring the Neo Geo library. I've ignored their library of 2D fighters for too long and I'm having a lot of fun with *King Of Fighters '98*. Would love to see a deep dive into the Neo Geo library soon.
Luke Middleham

Darran normally likes to focus on a single system, but recently he decided to play all of the *God Of War* games in order of release. Nick maintains order using his streams, keeping modern story-heavy games for Tuesdays and shorter games

» [Neo Geo] If you're going to play some *KOF, '98* is certainly a fine vintage.

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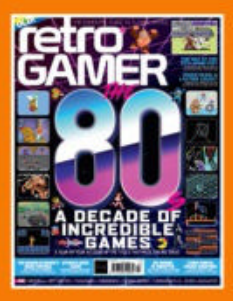

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» [Arcade] That thing about the ninja theme in the UK version is true – we checked and everything.

» We definitely agonise over covers before they hit shelves. The ninjas were intentional, trust us.

and retro games for Fridays. Tim tends to play whatever is on Xbox Games Pass, and Andy has a habit of sticking to one game for a very long time.

With regards to the Neo Geo, check out our Top 25 in issue 151, our feature on collecting Neo Geo fighting games in issue 198 and our hardware piece in issue 215.

COWABUNGA DUD?

Good evening,

This morning while walking home with this month's copy of **Retro Gamer** I noticed a blooper on the front cover of the magazine: The History Of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

During the Nineties when this cartoon was on CBBC, like many kids I was a huge fan, but in the UK it was called *Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles* because there was concern that using the word 'ninja' might encourage violence. It's a shame you did not all remember this before the deadline hit and the printers were printing copies of the magazine. What a bunch of Donatellos.

Matthew Jones

Nice catch, but it's not really a blooper – as you'll know by now, we addressed the UK name change in the feature. Besides, Konami used the ninja version of the theme song in the hero-titled UK arcade release, so it's fine!

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

Cinematic delights

Darran and Andy have been discussing the merits of having an unlimited cinema card. Andy dropped one of his streaming subscriptions because he found he'd already seen what he wanted at the cinema, and Darran's coming to the same conclusion. He recently saw *M3GAN*, a film he thought was a bit rubbish. Meanwhile, Nick doesn't have an unlimited card but is on trend as always, as he prepares to watch the original *John Wick* for the first time.

DEAD EXCITED

Hi **Retro Gamer**,

I just saw Darran mention online that *Dead Space* is old enough to appear in the mag. I love this game so please make it happen.

David Jeffords

Darran loves it as well, so look out for something by the year's end.

Your say

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

What are your favourite Eighties gaming memories?

Kev Bayliss
I think just the excitement of loading up a game for the first time. Especially if it happened to be good – like *The Last Ninja*. Also, the novelty of tech and typing in lines of code from *Sinclair Programs* magazine to get games for my ZX81! Learned a lot by doing so!

Matthew Owens
Playing *Bruce Lee* on the Commodore 64 for seven hours straight with a friend until my eyes turned shiny blue from looking at the screen too long.

Robert Meikle
Favourite thing was the variety. Not every friend had the same system so getting to play all these different games on different machines was incredible. Sorry kids, unlikely that'll ever happen again.

NinjaPanda
Compilations. Walking into pretty much any shop, Boots, Woollies, Dixons, Morrisons etc and seeing a ten-game compilation for the Spectrum for £7.99 and thinking you had won the jackpot. Amazing value in the Eighties.

Rothenberger Paul
Going on holiday and searching for the local arcades and finding that one banging game that got played for the two weeks. Really miss those days.

CL Alan
Getting an Atari 2600, playing games like *Combat* and *Centipede*. In arcades I spent most of my money playing *Operation Wolf*, people are still playing it today.

Ken Noir
I used to play on the *Shoot-'Em-Up Construction Kit* on the C64 for hours and hours. I was too young to know what I was doing, but I enjoyed shooting through the glorious shambles I'd create.

Ashley Beeching
Spending hours trying to get *Daley Thompson's Decathlon* to load on my ZX Spectrum, probably more time than actually playing it, and pumping far too many 10ps in the sit-in *Star Wars* arcade machine down the arcades in Margate!

retro GAMER

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Stunt Car Racer, Resident Evil 4, Sega's System 24 Games, Twilight, Bally Astrocade, James Bond 007: The Duel, Enduro Racer, Rich Adam, PS2 Vertical Stand, Lionheart, The Rumble Fish 1 & 2, Sengoku Blaede

ENDGAME

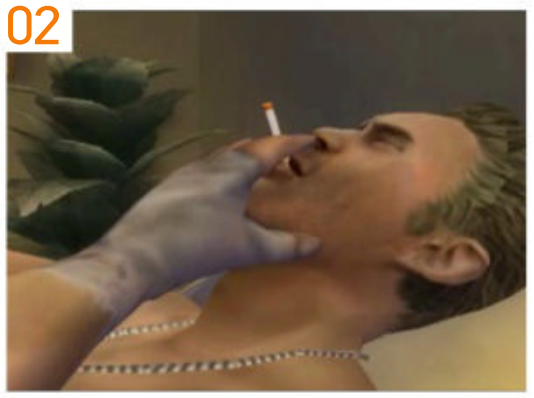
FINAL FIGHT: STREETWISE

» Fun fact: this revival of Capcom's classic beat-'em-up series is bad. How bad? Bad enough that one of Nick's former colleagues gave it to him for free, because he felt it would be immoral to accept money for it. So let's spare you all the trouble of actually playing it, and skip straight to the climax.

01

» "Kyle, mate, I think that energy drink might have sent me on a funny turn," Cody gasps. Kyle knows immediately what he must do – he must extract the demonic drink from Cody immediately, by any means necessary.

02

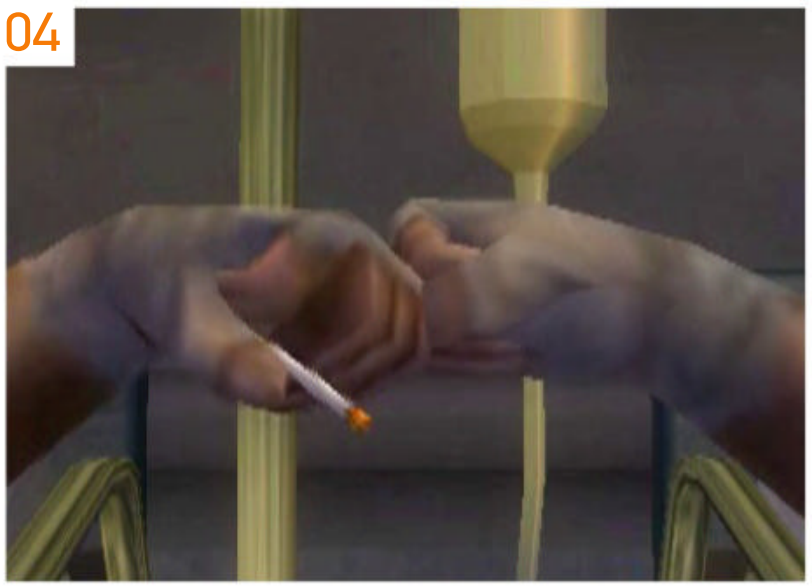


» It's fair to say things got a bit intense once Kyle got to work on Cody's body. Half a city block, 24 mid-sized family vehicles, two trucks and a burger van were destroyed in the process, but Kyle seems satisfied.

03

» Cody is battered, bruised and supremely sore, but ultimately still alive. "So," Kyle asks, "how was it for you?" Cody ponders a response. "Well, I've never done anything like that before, that's for damn sure..."

04



» "But in the end," Cody continues, "I loved it." He reaches out for a fist bump with his friend, one he never knew he could actually be so close to. "Could we maybe do this again next weekend?" Kyle chuckled, and prepared a reply – one which he'd never get out.

05

» Vanessa suddenly bursts into the room, shouting, "You're both under arrest on suspicion of starring in a dreadful game!" Under the law of finders keepers, her dead brother's police badge gives her the authority to do that. It's probably for the best.

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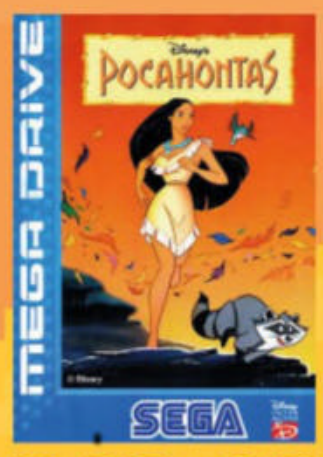

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